

KILLJOI.EXE

I came back smelling like copper and old milk.

It was near four in the morning—city lights all dimmed and piss-colored, the alley air thick with ozone, sweat, and reek from a busted milkbot someone'd dragged out of the old daycare. My boots left slip-tracks in the slop. Right sole flapped. Left sock soaked. My hands were sticky with not-mine blood, and my favorite blade was jammed in the meat of my bra like a crooked second rib.

I was still chewing the last of my cherry flavored gum when I reached the gate.

Clack.

One, one, two, five. That's the code.

The metal slab grunted, then slid back slow like it was too tired to argue. The garage lights flickered on—yellow, twitchy, hungover. Kale's Guillotine was parked with its nose up like a damn predator, black as a sin-smear, chrome fangs catching the strobe. I spat near it just out of spite. He'd polish that spot for hours tomorrow and scream about "respecting the ride."

Inside was warm and sour and too quiet.

No music. No yelling. No Cash yelling over music. No microwave war. Just low thrum from the war room vents and the soft click of security loops rebooting. It felt... off. Like someone'd pressed pause on our idiocy.

I crept past the main room couch stack—Ricardo wasn't there. Just a blanket with cat hair, a crumpled juice pack, and one of Trent's dirty socks rolled up like it wanted to hatch.

I peeled off my jacket in the kitchen, trying not to flinch. My shoulder was ripped open where the security drone tagged me. The skin pulsed like it had opinions. I washed my hands in the sink and watched the water turn pink.

"Hey," I said aloud. "Last job. That's what I said. That's what it was. Yeah?"

My voice sounded fake in the tile echo.

From my jacket I pulled the shard. It was no bigger than a thumbnail—glass-thin, bleeding glitchlight. The thing hissed softly in my palm like it hated me. I'd been carrying this thing around for years now. It wasn't supposed to do anything. Just data I think.

But when I stared at it too long, it stared back.

I shoved it into the sugar tin, then shoved the sugar tin under the counter behind three boxes of expired flakes.

"Done," I whispered. "Done with all this dreck."

I turned to leave.

Behind me, the lights flickered once.

Then again.

Then all at once, everything turned off.

Like A Dog At A Funeral

The lights snapped back like they'd just remembered how to be alive.

Overhead fluorescents fizzed and blinked—soft white, blue, then that awful clinic-green. The hum returned, deep and low, like the house was sighing in its sleep. Somewhere down the hall, a toilet gurgled like it had something to say.

I didn't move at first. Just stared at the counter, hands still damp, knuckles raw. The shard was still in the sugar tin, still tucked behind the synth-flakes. I hadn't hallucinated that part.

I told myself it was just a blackout. Random surge. Grid hiccup. Could've been a dozen things. This old place sucked juice like a rusted mech after a thunderstorm.

Still.

I didn't like the timing.

I grabbed a towel, dried my hands, and padded out into the main hall in my socks. One was wet. Always was. I should've changed it. I didn't. Too late, too tired, too stupid.

Past the toy-strewn floor. Past the scuffed-up monkey mural someone had tagged over with a cartoon of Kale choking Trent. I stepped careful down into the war room pit—floor low, lights low, server glow washing the walls like heartbeat tech. All still. All soft.

No signs of entry. No sign of tampering.

Still, I checked the terminals.

Cash's terminal blinked normally. Green pulse. "ALL JUICED UP, BABY" scrawled in permanent marker over the fan port. I resisted the urge to kick it.

Breaker board: stable. Power rerouted from the mall-top siphon, backup cores still online, solar-to-battery delay like always.

Nothing wrong.

So why the whisper?

I ran a palm across the steel panel, slow. Warm. Just warm. Not hot. Not pulsing. Not... alive.

I caught myself holding my breath.

Behind me, the common room couch let out a deep fwump. Fabric shifting. Probably just Ricardo, falling in his sleep like a trash angel. Probably.

Still.

I tapped the breaker once, twice. Just to be sure. The hum stuttered. My skin crawled.

That's when I heard the buzz. Low. Not from the servers. Not from the walls. Not even from the tin where the shard still waited like a sick tooth.

This was higher. Flickering. A voice, maybe.

I turned toward it.

The intercom in the corner—an old preschool relic, retrofitted with Cash's mod hardware and Kale's paranoid security mesh—lit up for half a blink.

Then dimmed again.

I stood there. Waiting. Still as the old mural. One hand hovering by my side where a knife used to be.

Nothing.

I shook my head. Said to no one, "Stop it. Just stop."

The house didn't answer.

The peace didn't last.

First came the clatter of boots and high-volume bitching from the garage tunnel.

"—I said you melted the damn control pad, Trent. That's a war crime."

"Oh please, like your dumbass duct-taped van could even feel it. I fixed it with my mind."

Cash and Trent.

Voices bouncing off the hallway tiles like angry tennis balls. A second later, the smell hit—burned soy, melted plastic, and whatever trench stank was living inside Trent's hoodie today.

I slipped back toward the kitchen and leaned on the fridge, arms crossed, trying not to look rattled. Or guilty. Or haunted.

The boys stomped in. Cash was wearing half a VR headset pushed up like a stupid tech monocle, sweat-wet curls stuck to his forehead. He had food wrappers stuck in one sleeve and a bag of noodles clutched like a newborn.

Trent was shirtless again. Worse—he was in tiny boxer-briefs with a little corpcartoon frog on the thigh. One sock. No shoes. No shame.

“Kitchen’s haunted,” I said flatly.

They froze.

Then Trent grinned wide, real greasy. “You finally kill the microwave spirit? I’ve been hearing it whispering ‘popcorn’ for three days.”

I didn’t answer.

Cash gave me a once-over. “You good, Razor? You look like you just saw God get mugged.”

“I’m peachy.”

“You bleedin’?”

“No.”

He blinked, leaned around me, and opened the fridge. The power had reset the seal-lock. A puff of cold air whooshed out and was instantly consumed by noodle funk.

Cash jammed his whole head in. “Dibs on the cheese.”

“You already licked it,” I muttered.

“That makes it mine under crew law.” He emerged, clutching a half-solid block of glowing orange. “You know how this works.”

Trent shoved past and grabbed a pot off the counter. “I’m making emergency soup.”

“From what?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

He opened the lower cabinet, took out a can labeled DOG-COW HYBRID FEED - TEST BATCH #C4 and dropped it into the pot with a dull clank.

I didn’t stop him.

Just then, from the hall, a thud-thud-thud and a high screech: “I CAN SMELL NOODLE MURDER.”

Ricardo.

He skidded into the room barefoot in a giant hoodie, two sizes too big, with someone else's name tag still stapled to the sleeve. His eyes were half-shut, but he was smiling like he'd just been born in soup.

"Yo," he mumbled at me, and gave a sideways hug before collapsing into a beanbag near the oven.

"Hey, stormie," he added, using one of his weirdo nicknames for me.

"Hey, rico."

Behind him, a heavier set of boots approached. Sharp. Purposeful. Like they were walking in a straight line through every other footstep in the world.

Michael.

He stepped into the kitchen, jacket slung over one shoulder, blood on one knuckle. He scanned the room fast, then let out a sigh through his teeth like the tension had been driving cross-country in his lungs.

His eyes found mine.

"Kar," he said.

"Back late," I replied.

He nodded once. "So are you."

I wanted to say something smart. I didn't.

Just as he opened his mouth again—

"WHERE'S MY GODDAMN SOUP LADLE," came Kale's scream from deep within the house. "IF ONE OF YOU GOONS TOUCHED THE LADLE I'LL RIP YOUR LIPS OFF AND EAT SOUP WITH THOSE!"

Silence.

Then Cash muttered, "God, I hope it's his romantic voice again."

Michael dropped his jacket on the back of the kitchen chair like it had insulted him.

Nobody else noticed the blood on his knuckle, but I did. Bright red, crusted at the base of his thumb. Not his blood. Wrong color. He'd cleaned up the rest, but not that spot.

He leaned on the counter, eyes tracking the pot Trent was stirring like it might explode.

"It smells like wet hate in here," he said.

"That's just Trent," Cash said. "Or dog-cow."

"It's not cow," Trent added proudly.

“Soup of who?” Ricardo asked, slurring from the beanbag. “What’s the flavor profile—screams and hoof?”

“Why do I even talk to you people,” Michael muttered.

I moved to the far side of the room, near the wall where the cracked whiteboard still listed someone’s failed workout plan. I leaned against it and tried to act like I wasn’t twitching.

Michael looked at me. Not suspicious—just reading, like he always does. Quiet X-ray vision. He looked back at the crew.

Then: “You hear about Smokerow?”

That killed the laughter. Even Ricardo sat up a little straighter.

“Fire?” Cash guessed.

“Corp sweep?” Trent asked.

“No,” Michael said, voice low. “Body.”

He waited.

“Body had our sig carved into the ribs.”

That hit. Even the soup stopped boiling like it got uncomfortable.

Cash rubbed his face. “Please tell me this is one of your metaphors, like that time you said the database was ‘bleeding’ and it was just a corrupted hex file.”

“No metaphor,” Michael said.

Kale appeared in the doorway, shirtless and furious, holding a ladle like a holy relic. “What body?”

“Smokerow. Voodoo territory.”

Kale blinked. “Well that’s dreck.”

Michael nodded. “They’re sending a message.”

Trent snorted. “That’s cute. Like they didn’t try that already.”

“They did,” Michael agreed. “This time feels different.”

Kale slammed the ladle into the counter. “They wanna play corpse-tag, I’ll drop off a whole damn alphabet.”

I watched his muscles tense, jaw flex, rage coiled like a spring.

But Michael ignored him and looked at me.

“They think we’re getting soft,” he said. “That we’re—what? Distracted? Turning domestic?”

“Maybe we are,” I said, too fast.

He tilted his head slightly. “You out of it, Kar?”

“Just tired.”

“Uh-huh.”

That uh-huh was worse than any accusation. It was worse because it meant he knew something was off, but wouldn’t push. Not yet.

Ricardo mumbled, “Maybe they just missed us. Absence makes the blood grow fonder.”

Michael didn’t laugh.

“Point is,” he said, standing tall again, “we keep our eyes sharp for a few cycles. No solo jobs. No split routes. We move tight. We move ugly.”

“Just how I like it,” Kale said, glaring at the ladle like it betrayed him.

“And for the love of neon,” Michael added, “don’t provoke them.”

All eyes turned to Kale.

He raised both hands. “I haven’t even messaged them since last time. I’ve been respectful.”

“You posted a meme of their shrine burning with a thumbs-up emoji,” Cash said.

“Yeah but I didn’t tag them.”

Michael just rubbed the bridge of his nose.

The room started to shift back—Ricardo whining about flavors, Trent telling everyone about “his ancient war tattoos,” Cash rifling through the fridge for expired sauce packets.

But I stayed quiet.

Because I knew something they didn’t.

I hadn’t told them that this thing is whispering to me.

And worse, I wasn’t sure it had stayed in the tin.

I couldn’t sleep. Again.

Ricardo’s blanket was itchy with bad dreams and incense ash. The couch had a spring stabbing up like it was owed something. Every breath felt like it had a wire in it. Tight. Buzzing.

I kept staring at the ceiling fan, which wasn’t spinning, and trying not to look at the kitchen.

I didn't hear him coming—just felt that familiar pressure shift in the air, like the volume of a room lowering.

“Kar?”

Kale's voice. Quiet, for once.

I rolled halfway toward the sound. He was standing in the hallway, bare feet, t-shirt slung over one shoulder like a boxer who forgot the match. His head glinted under the light—fresh-shaved.

“What?” I muttered.

“You doin’ that thing again.”

“What thing.”

“The... y’know. The haunted lying-down breathing thing.”

I sat up. “That’s just what sleeping looks like, Kale.”

“Not from you.”

His voice wasn't teasing. That caught me.

He scratched the back of his neck, looked away. “If you're gonna ghost around all insomniac and psycho-toned, you can at least crash in my room. I cleaned the floor and everything.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Is this because you think I'm sad, or because you want someone to spoon you before nightmares come back?”

He smirked, half-proud. “Yes.”

Normally I'd say no.

Tonight, I said, “Fine, I feel dead anyway.”

His room smelled like gun oil, sweat, and lemon-scented boot wipes. The walls were plastered with posters of street-fighters and half-naked cyborg girls with grenade launchers. It looked exactly like what Kale's brain probably looked like inside.

But the bed was warm, and I was cold.

We lay side by side, backs turned, just enough distance that we could lie to ourselves.

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

“Mm,” he replied. “Don't get weird about it.”

I didn't.

For maybe ten minutes, it felt okay.

Then the static started.

Soft. Subtle. Just enough to bend the silence.

Kale sat up fast. “The dreck was that?”

I was already moving.

We crept into the hall. Lights off. House humming like a tired animal.

The sound was coming from the intercom—dim glow, low flicker. Same as before.

Kale moved toward it. “Did Cash leave one of his hacks running again? If that freak installed another AI that whispers poetry—”

“It’s not Cash,” I said. “It happened earlier too.”

“You didn’t tell anyone?”

“I thought it was... nothing.”

The whisper came again. Just breath. Shifting syllables. Not quite words, but not noise either.

Kale’s face changed.

Not scared. Angry.

“I’m unplugging it.”

“No,” I said, grabbing his arm.

He froze. Looked at me. “You scared?”

“Yes.”

“Cool. Let’s go see what it is.”

I wanted to hit him.

Instead I followed him down the hall.

The war room was dim and ice-blue, lit by monitor light. The air smelled sharp, like electrics. Something was wrong.

“The tin,” I whispered.

Kale blinked. “The what now?”

I dropped to the floor, heart sprinting, and yanked open the lower cabinet.

Empty.

Gone.

I scrambled up. Searched behind the cereal. Behind the burner. My pulse felt like static in my teeth.

Kale crouched beside me. “Okay, you’re acting way murderly right now, and I love that for you, but explain.”

“There was a shard,” I said. “I been holding onto it for 9 years. I thought it was nothing, just pretty to look at. I hid it.”

“You hid it in the kitchen?”

“Where else would you not look?”

He frowned. “Valid.”

Then the whisper shifted. It came from inside the war room.

We both turned.

The main terminal lit up.

Black screen. One line of text.

DO YOU SEE IT TOO

Kale took a step back. “Nope.”

The line vanished.

He looked at me. “Did that say what I think it said?”

“Yeah.”

“Is this... is this like a ghost thing? Or a demon? Or some sick freak from KravTek? Or like, an AI that wants to marry you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You wanna—like, unplug it? Shoot it? Pray?”

“I don’t know.”

We stood there. Silent. Just us and the hum.

Then Kale said, quiet, “Whatever this dreck is, it’s not getting to you first.”

I didn’t respond. Just looked at the place where the words had been.

And I realized something that froze me harder than any whisper:

I wasn't scared for myself.

I was scared for them.

By the time the sun-lamps kicked on, I'd already stuffed the sugar tin back into its hiding place—top shelf, inside an empty protein canister, labeled “Expired - For Kale Only.”

Kale offered to stay up and watch it with me.

I told him no.

He stayed anyway. On the floor. One knife in hand. One eye open. Just breathing.

I didn't sleep. Just stared at the war room wall until the blue light turned gray.

When I slumped back into the kitchen a few hours later, Ricardo was making coffee by stirring stim sludge with a screwdriver. Cash was crouched on the counter, eyes bloodshot, eating freeze-dried pickles from the jar like a raccoon in a tech vest.

Trent was half-dressed, aggressively chewing an unpeeled orange.

“Morning, sunshine,” Cash said without looking up. “How's the love nest?”

I blinked. “What?”

“Kale's room,” Ricardo added, grinning sleepily. “You had a whole snuggle saga in there, yeah?”

Trent gasped with mock horror. “Was that you I heard moaning, or was Kale just doing push-ups aggressively again?”

I squinted at him. “That was the sound of me trying to sleep while your porn-bluetooth glitched through the vents again.”

“Oh,” Trent said. “Then it was me.”

Cash nudged Ricardo with his pickle jar. “You think she finally cracked? Kale's been simping harder than a malfunctioning lovebot since last monsoon.”

Ricardo nodded, solemn. “He does look like he's been fed emotionally.”

I grabbed a spoon and flung it at the counter. It bounced. Cash caught it one-handed.

“We didn't do anything,” I said, flat.

“Uh-huh,” said all three, in chorus.

“I was cold. He offered. I slept.”

“And he wept with joy,” Cash said.

“Genuinely think he called his car ‘Karyna Jr.’ once,” Ricardo added.

“Would explain the sticky steering wheel,” Trent muttered.

I opened the fridge, stared into the void of expired cheese packs and vaguely threatening jelly jars, and tried not to throw something sharp.

“I didn’t kiss him,” I said.

“Didn’t say you did,” Cash replied, all too casually. “But we all heard the knife drawer open at 3 a.m., so...”

“So?”

“So we figured you either kissed or killed him.”

I slammed the fridge shut. “I’m gonna kill you.”

“Ooooh,” they all said.

And yet...

I didn’t correct them again.

A few minutes later, Michael walked in, quiet and unreadable as always. Gave me one look. No smile. Just a nod.

He knew I hadn’t slept.

He probably knew more than that.

But he said nothing. Just grabbed a mug, poured half a cup, sipped, then winced like the coffee had opinions.

“Why does this taste like glue and regret?” he asked.

“Because Ricardo made it,” I said.

Ricardo raised a finger without looking up. “With love.”

Later, while they were distracted arguing about soup ethics again, I slipped into the war room. Quiet. Alone.

I reached for the tin.

Still there.

Still closed.

I opened it.

The shard sat inside.

Calm. Dull. Like nothing had happened.

I stared at it.

Then, without thinking, I touched it again.

It was warm.

But no sound. No words. No screen flicker. No whispers.

Just that warmth.

And something faint underneath it.

Sweet.

Like sugar.

Dressed To Depress

The job was supposed to be boring. Courier run to a corp front in the downtown stacks—pick up a sealed crate, deliver it five blocks over, don't open it, don't ask. Easy creds.

So of course we were already fighting before we even left the house.

"I'm not taking you anywhere looking like that," Kale said, pointing like Ricardo had personally insulted his ancestors.

Ricardo twirled once—slow, graceful, obnoxious.

He wore a pink glitter crop top, a pair of electric blue synth-leather pants, and boots with enough shine to blind a drone. His hair was pinned back with a clip shaped like a crying bunny. His nails sparkled like the floor of a crime scene.

He looked like a rave hallucination after three tequila-patched memories.

"I look amazing," Ricardo said simply, sipping from a straw stuck into a juice pouch labeled MANGO SLAP+.

"You look like a bootleg K-pop star that fell down a flight of stairs," Kale shot back.

"Thanks."

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

“I know. I rebranded it mid-air.”

Kale looked at me. “Tell him.”

I shrugged. “He’s technically more coordinated than you.”

Ricardo grinned at that. Kale muttered something about “psychic damage.”

Cash rolled in from the hall with a half-dismantled drone under his arm and a stim stick between his teeth. “Is this the fight where one of you actually kisses the other or are we still pretending it’s just vibes?”

Kale stiffened. “Eat dirt, Cash.”

“Only if Ricardo sprinkles glitter on it.”

Ricardo winked. “I have edible glitter. And flavored.”

Michael entered from the garage, serious as always, already geared up. He paused just long enough to glance at Ricardo, blink once, then keep walking.

“Just don’t die,” he said. “Either of you.”

We all took that as approval.

The van—Soupwagon Prime—smelled like old curry and boot oil. Kale insisted on driving, even though Cash owned it. I sat shotgun. Ricardo sprawled across the backseat like a cat trying to seduce the sun.

Five minutes in, Kale was already chewing his own cheek.

Ricardo hummed. Loud. Off-key.

“You don’t take anything seriously,” Kale said, not looking back.

“I take vibes very seriously,” Ricardo replied. “And soup.”

“You can’t just float through jobs like it’s recess.”

“I’m not floating. I’m vibing. It’s different.”

I kept quiet. This wasn’t a new argument.

Ricardo had survived more jobs than any of us should’ve, and always with that sleepy smile, that lazy grace, like nothing could hurt him. No armor. No knife. Just nerve and nonsense.

Kale had survived through fists, blood, and fury. The idea that Ricardo made it all look easy—it chewed at him.

The silence stretched.

Then Ricardo said, brightly, “You jealous I get more compliments than you, Eggman?”

“Keep talking and I’ll turn this van into a casket.”

Ricardo sipped his juice. “Make sure it’s glitter-lined.”

Kale gripped the wheel so hard I thought it might scream.

The pickup point was in an old dentist’s office halfway swallowed by a glowing billboard shaped like a laughing baby. The front still had faded corp logos and security glass, but behind it was all black market—fake IDs, bootleg blood, reprocessed dermal seals.

Cash ran a thermal scan from the van. “Clean,” he said.

Michael grunted. “In and out.”

Kale and I stepped through the front first. Ricardo followed, bouncing slightly with every step like he was walking on a synthpop beat only he could hear.

Inside, it was all cheap LED strips and stale incense. The receptionist was a drone head mounted on a servo arm. It blinked once, beeped, and waved us through.

Back room. One crate. No guards.

Too clean.

Kale lifted the crate, grunted. “Feels light.”

“That’s what you said last time,” Ricardo said, peering at the walls like they might suddenly sprout teeth. “And then you fell through a fake floor.”

“I fell through because someone tripped the latch,” Kale snapped.

“I was distracted by your screaming.”

“Boys,” I said, warning-tone.

Kale rolled his eyes, turned—and then the trap clicked.

A hiss.

The floor vent near Kale’s feet burst open, releasing a chemical cloud—pale green, fast, full of micro-shards and stun gas. His whole body jolted like he got punched by a ghost.

He dropped to his knees, coughing, choking, eyes wild.

I moved forward, but the gas cloud surged.

Cash's voice crackled over comms. "Back! That's a type-three disruptor blend! Respiratory flash suppressant—nasty as hell!"

Kale dropped fully now, hand out, fingers scrabbling against the wall. The crate slid away from him, hit the floor.

I couldn't reach him—not without eating the gas too.

Ricardo didn't hesitate.

He ran straight into it—arms wide like he was greeting a parade float.

"What are you doing?!" I shouted.

"I'm immune to nonsense!" he yelled back.

He slipped—actually slipped—on the gas-soaked floor and crashed into Kale, knocking both of them behind the metal desk near the wall.

There was a loud clunk, then coughing, then a weird "boing" noise.

A second later, a blast of air vented from the side wall—Ricardo had somehow triggered an emergency purge duct, flushing the room clean in one shuddering roar.

Silence.

Then coughing.

Then a soft voice: "Kale bit me."

Another cough. "I did not."

"You did. Like a scared chihuahua."

I rushed in, grabbed the crate, and knelt beside them.

Kale's eyes were red. He was breathing like a bellows, but alive. No burns. No blood. No permanent damage.

He wouldn't look at me.

Or Ricardo.

Ricardo grinned, still lying on the floor like a pageant winner.

"You owe me soup," he said.

We loaded up fast after that. Nobody spoke in the van.

Kale sat in the back with his hood up, arms crossed, staring out the window like it might punch him. Ricardo sprawled across from him, humming and eating trail mix with sparkly fingers.

He didn't gloat.

That made it worse.

The pit was already warm by the time they squared off.

Concrete floor, stripped mats, a half-broken vending drone blinking in the corner like it wanted to cheer someone on. The crew ringed the edges—Cash munching synthetic popcorn, Trent stretching like a pro athlete despite his complete lack of talent, Michael leaning against the wall with his arms folded.

Me?

I was sitting cross-legged on an old kiddie chair, staring at the ceiling like it had meaning. Because it did.

It was swirling.

It was humming.

It was judging me.

I licked my teeth and whispered, "Stop judging me."

Ricardo bounced on the balls of his feet, loose and smiling.

Kale cracked his knuckles. No smile. No show this time.

"Three rounds, no weapons, no biting," Cash called.

"You bit me earlier," Ricardo said.

"Only 'cause you squeaked," Kale replied.

"You bit me like a mozzarella stick."

"Shut up and move."

And they did.

Ricardo dodged like wind. Danced around Kale's fists with slippery steps, laughing each time he ducked a punch. Kale was faster, stronger, all fury and heat—but Ricardo never stayed still.

He didn't fight back.

He just endured.

Kale's swings got heavier. Sloppier.

Sweat beaded on his scalp. His face darkened.

Ricardo ducked, twisted, then slipped on a discarded stim patch. He crashed backward, hit the floor with a theatrical "oof," and rolled into a somersault.

"Stop clowning!" Kale barked, voice cracking.

Ricardo looked up from the mat, smiling sideways.

"This isn't clowning. This is me surviving you."

That snapped something.

Kale lunged—not with play. With anger.

Too fast.

Ricardo didn't dodge this time. Just braced.

That's when I screamed.

They all turned.

I was halfway across the pit now, barefoot, hair a mess, eyes wide like I'd just seen a ghost in a ball pit.

"Stop touching the jellyfish," I shouted. "It's singing to the dead kids!"

Silence.

Everyone stared at me.

Cash: "Uh."

Michael: "No."

Ricardo: “Hell yeah.”

Trent: “Is she quoting something or having a stroke?”

Kale’s fists lowered.

I turned in a slow circle and slapped Kale’s chest lightly. “You smell like soup lies.”

“Karyna,” Michael said. “What did you take.”

“Nothing,” I said, defensive. “Just vitamins.”

Cash raised his brow. “Which vitamins.”

“The pink ones.”

They all groaned at once.

Cash: “Pink?! Are you kriffing kidding—who gave her that?”

“I found it,” I said proudly. “Behind the cereal. It was sparkly.”

Ricardo gasped. “You took a back-of-the-cabinet unmarked capsule?!”

“It was calling to me.”

Cash buried his face in both hands. “That’s Pink. Michael, that’s Pink. That’s not even a party drug—it’s like being punched in the soul by a glitter angel.”

“I can see everyone’s secrets,” I said softly. “Kale’s afraid he’s not the man he pretends to be. And Ricardo is already dead, but like, in a poetic way.”

Kale looked like he’d just been slapped by God.

“...I’m done,” he muttered, and walked off.

Ricardo sat down beside me, cross-legged, and patted my shoulder gently. “Hey. You okay in there, Bladeflower?”

“I’m inside the soup,” I whispered.

“That’s my girl.”

The house creaked when it cooled.

Old pipes groaning. Ducts hissing. Neon slats outside flickering like broken fireworks. Everyone was half-asleep or comatose from emotional fatigue and bad soup.

Everyone except Kale.

He was in the armory, cleaning knives like they were bad memories. Shirt off. Shoulders tight. Jaw working like he was chewing words he couldn’t spit out.

I stood in the doorway and watched him for a second.

Then: “You gonna sulk until sunrise or just growl and hump the floor like usual?”

He didn’t look up. “Not in the mood, Kar.”

“Tough. I am.”

He said nothing.

I stepped inside, crossed the cluttered floor—past the rack of batons, stun knuckles, the nail bomb Cash made as a joke that might still be live.

“I’m not high anymore,” I said softly. “So I’m gonna ask this for real.”

He paused, mid-polish.

“What the dreck is your problem with Ricardo?”

Now he looked up.

His eyes weren’t angry. Just tired.

“He’s weak,” Kale said. “He acts like the world’s some glitter parade. Like he can dance through bullets. No armor, no weapons. He’s soft, Kar.”

“He’s not weak.”

“He’s soft,” he repeated, sharper. “He smiles at everything. Talks in riddles. Sprawls out on couches like he’s got no spine. And somehow he always lives. Every job, every screwup—he just laughs and keeps going.”

I crossed my arms. “So what? You mad he survives without bleeding?”

“Yes.”

It came out fast. Honest. Raw.

He leaned back against the table, flexing his grip like it would hold the rest of him steady.

“I had to fight for every scrap of space in my own body,” Kale said. “Every scar, every bruise, every time someone looked at me and didn’t see ‘punk-ass little bald freak’—that was earned. I bled for it. I broke people for it.”

His voice dropped.

“Then he floats in. In glitter boots. And people like him anyway.”

I didn’t speak.

He looked at me again. Quieter now. “And I don’t get it.”

“Maybe you’re trying to win a game he’s not playing.”

“That’s worse.”

I moved closer.

“You think you’re broken because you had to fight. He’s just broken different. His softness? That’s armor. It’s harder than yours. It just doesn’t show.”

He didn’t answer.

I touched his wrist.

“You don’t hate him, Kale. You envy him. That’s okay.”

He pulled away, but not violently.

“I don’t need him to change,” he muttered.

“No,” I said. “But you need to stop trying to break him for existing.”

He didn’t say anything after that.

Just went back to cleaning the knife that already gleamed.

Kale was on the stoop outside the kitchen, shirtless, bruised, elbow resting on his knee. The lights overhead were dim enough to cast his jaw in shadow and make him look poetic. Which was annoying, because he didn’t know how to be poetic—he just brooded hard enough that it happened by accident.

Ricardo found him like that.

He was holding a blue popsicle, already unwrapped, already melting slightly between his fingers. He didn’t say anything. Just flopped down beside Kale, cross-legged, still wearing the glitter boots.

They sat in silence for a long minute.

Then Ricardo said, “You look like a soap opera character who got written out in season two.”

Kale didn’t respond.

Ricardo extended the popsicle toward him. “Peace offering. Contains real dye.”

Kale didn’t take it.

So Ricardo leaned in and nudged it gently against his upper arm, right on the bruise.

Kale flinched. “I will bite you again.”

“You can try. But I’m full of sugar now. Probably taste better.”

Another pause.

Then Kale, slowly, without looking at him, took the popsicle and bit it clean in half.

“I still think you’re soft,” he muttered.

Ricardo smiled, resting his chin on his knees. “And yet I’m alive.”

“That’s the part that makes me mad.”

Ricardo didn’t laugh. Just nodded a little. “I get that more than you think.”

They didn’t say anything else for a while.

The wind from the broken rooftop fan creaked, soft.

I watched them from the hallway.

Ricardo, content and glowing like an old disco ball.

Kale, hunched and bruised and pretending he hadn’t just accepted a popsicle as a truce.

Two boys who should never have survived.

Somehow surviving anyway.

I didn’t interrupt.

Just turned back toward the war room.

The tin was still hidden. The shard still warm.

The crew might patch itself up again tonight.

But something in the house still wasn’t right.

And I could feel it watching me back.

Good News, Bad Plan

Cash burst into the war room with toast in his mouth and his datapad clutched like a holy relic.

“We got a problem, opportunity, or both—depending how stupid we’re feeling today.”

I blinked up from where I was sitting on the floor, legs crossed, still staring at the shard inside its tin. It hadn’t moved. But it felt louder every day.

Michael looked up from a holomap. “Cash. You have crumbs in your beard again.”

“Yeah, and I got Voodoo comm traffic spiking around a shipment drop. Code tags match Red Whisper, Skyline, and something called—wait for it—Vice Milk.”

“Vice what?” Ricardo asked, upside-down on the couch.

“Empathy suppressant. Makes you watch people cry and not care. Experimental. Might also make your teeth fall out.”

“Charming,” I said.

“They’re keeping it in a sealed corp vault,” Cash went on, mouth still full. “One of those hybrid analog-lock, biometric-seal types. Transport-grade, zero-hackable. Just showed up in Midtown late last night, dropped off in a shell van that used to belong to a—get this—baby formula company.”

“That’s poetry,” Ricardo whispered.

“They’re stashing it at the old Toussaint Center,” Cash finished. “Heavily fortified. Extra gang muscle. Psychic wards. They’re treating this stuff like relics.”

“Which means it’s worth a lot,” Michael said.

“Exactly. If we steal it, we’re gods. If we fail, we die messy.”

Kale leaned forward from his spot on the floor and said, way too casually, “Let’s just take the vault.”

Silence.

Trent coughed into his hand. “You mean the drugs inside the vault.”

“No,” Kale said, eyes bright with something dangerous. “The vault. All of it. Steal the whole kriffing box and crack it later.”

Michael stared at him. “It weighs half a metric ton.”

“We got lifts.”

“You don’t just steal a vault,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s in a Voodoo stronghold?”

“Yeah,” Kale said, standing up. “And? We go in, roll it out, disappear before they finish their spirit chanting. Boom. Done.”

“Boom us,” Cash said. “We’d need forged access, noise cover, at least two distractions—”

“Three,” Michael added. “One to intercept their perimeter patrols.”

“I love this plan,” Ricardo said from the couch, still upside down. “It has terrible energy. Let’s do it.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

Ricardo grinned. “Vaults are just big secrets that forgot how to lie flat. I wanna hug it.”

Kale clapped once. “See? At least he gets it.”

“You just want to impress Karyna,” Cash said.

“No,” Kale said. Then looked at me. “But also yes.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m only voting yes if I get to wear something stupid.”

Trent leaned in. “Are we gonna do disguises? Please tell me there’s a disguise plan.”

Michael sighed like he was physically aging. “This is going to be terrible.”

Kale grinned. “This is gonna be legendary.”

Ricardo raised a hand. “I call dibs on being the clown.”

No one argued.

Because somehow, this was happening now.

The Toussaint Center sat like a fortress dipped in paint.

Three stories tall, concrete and steel spine, but the outer walls were glowing—hand-painted murals of ancestors, wild gods, symbols with teeth. The door was an old cathedral frame welded onto reinforced smartglass. Overhead, two defunct satellite dishes had been covered in ritual cloth and coded lightnetting that shimmered with prayers.

It was beautiful. Sacred.

It was also impossible to rob.

We sat in the Soupwagon parked across the street under a dead billboard that used to sell teeth replacements. Cash was at the dash terminal, chewing a stimcap like it owed him rent.

“Two guards front,” he muttered. “Three inside the airlock. Sensors above the west stairwell, two sniper turrets camouflaged as broken streetlamps.”

“Psychic pressure grid?” Michael asked.

“Active. Strong. Makes your gut twist like you’re about to lie to your mom.”

I stared through a crack in the window. One of the guards wore a mask shaped like a weeping child. Another had a machete carved from bone and a belt full of incense bombs.

“This is stupid,” I said.

“That’s not news,” Cash replied.

Michael was dead silent. Watching. Calculating. He tapped the map display once, zooming in.

“They rotate security twice every two hours. Drone sweeps on the hour. That vault’s in the underground chapel, second level basement. Only access is interior stairwell or—” he tapped again, “—the west cargo elevator.”

Cash raised a brow. “You thinking of going in loud?”

“No,” Michael said. “I’m thinking of going in weird.”

That’s when the noise shifted.

From the side of the building came the sounds of drums. Laughter. Music.

We all looked.

A dozen Voodoos in ceremonial wear poured out of a side door, followed by balloons—real ones—and a two-meter-tall bipedal cat mascot holding a cake.

“What in the glittery hell is this?” I asked.

Cash hacked into the center’s local mesh node and pulled a feed.

Onscreen: a schedule.

“Birthday party?” he said. “Wait—yeah. ‘Naomi Gris-Gris - 10th birthday celebration - protected rite - emotional shielding enforced.’”

Michael leaned closer. “They’re dropping their psychic barriers during the party. Noise fields go up instead.”

“Which means less surveillance,” I said, heart kicking.

Cash scrolled further. “Three-hour window. From ten p.m. to one a.m. All non-essential monitoring drops. Ritual focus diverts internal security toward emotional shielding and celebratory containment.”

“They’re throwing a magic birthday party,” I said. “With a blind spot.”

Kale’s voice buzzed in over comms from the House of Hoodlums: “Did someone say ‘birthday heist’?”

Ricardo chimed in from the background: “Do I get to wear a hat?”

Michael closed the mesh feed.

“Three hours,” he said. “We go in during the party.”

“Performers,” I added.

Cash grinned. “Costumes. Chaos. A vault in drag.”

Michael didn’t smile. But he nodded.

“Let’s break into a ten-year-old’s party,” I said. “What could possibly go wrong?”

If I ever die, I want it to be with glitter on my lips and a fake crown falling off my head.

That’s what I thought as I stood just inside the side entrance of the Toussaint Center, dressed in a tattered princess dress made of silver wire and sheer veil-cloth, holding a balloon animal shaped like a two-headed snake.

Kale stood to my left, shirtless, fireproof gel smeared across his chest, goggles pushed up onto his bald head, fire canisters strapped to both wrists. He kept breathing like he was about to fight the building itself.

To my right, Ricardo wore a full clown suit fused with ritual symbology—chalk markings, glowing thread, smile stretched with paint. His boots squeaked.

“I feel divine,” he whispered.

“You look like a haunted cereal box,” I whispered back.

He beamed.

The main hall had been transformed. Streamers hung from light fixtures shaped like bone thrones. A cake taller than me sat on a levitating table, pulsing slightly. Kids screamed. Music played. Someone was summoning balloon animals from a summoning circle.

And yet—somehow—we fit in.

Papa Gris-Gris himself sat on a throne of speakers at the back, ringed by guards, one arm draped over a laughing child: his daughter Naomi. She wore a glowing tiara and wielded a glowing stick that may have been an actual wand.

Kale leaned toward me. “I can’t believe this is working.”

“Shut up before you jinx it.”

Cash’s voice clicked through comms in our ear-links: “I’ve patched into the hallway cams. You’re clear to move in five. Michael’s inside, disguised as one of the catering team. I’m routing elevator control now.”

Kale gave a nod. “Time to burn.”

“Wait,” Ricardo whispered. “Shouldn’t we do a quick prayer?”

“We’re stealing from a spiritual gang, Ricardo.”

“Exactly. Gotta respect the space.”

“Just move.”

We slipped out of the performance area through the western corridor. Trent, in a fake snake-charmer outfit, was humming loudly and twirling a flute he didn’t know how to play.

Kale hissed, “You better not touch anything cursed.”

“I’m not touching! I’m tapping!”

“Shut up!” we all said.

We made it to the freight elevator.

Cash’s voice: “Okay, here’s the fun part. Vault’s two floors down. Ritual anchors are embedded in the concrete. You’ll need to cut the moorings manually before the hoverlift can move it.”

Kale flexed. “I brought knives.”

“Of course you did.”

The elevator opened. We slid inside.

Down we went. The lights flickered. My hands felt sweaty inside the princess gloves. Ricardo was softly humming something that sounded like a lullaby sung backward.

Ding.

Doors opened.

The vault sat in the middle of the sublevel chapel—big, black, matte-surfaced, humming with protective sigils and cyber-locks. Chains—real and digital—were anchored to all four corners, lit with wardlight. Candles burned in a ring around it, untouched.

Kale whistled. “She’s beautiful.”

“Don’t flirt with it,” I said.

Ricardo whispered, “I want to be inside her.”

“I said stop.”

Kale got to work with the mooring locks. Cash guided him via audio. I started disabling the floor sensors. Ricardo began carefully sweeping away the candle line.

Trent wandered.

Trent touched something.

Something on the wall hummed.

A mask twisted and opened an eye.

“What did you do?!” I hissed.

“Nothing!”

“Trent!”

The air crackled. The candles flared. Sirens didn’t go off, but the spiritual pressure spiked—like something invisible just opened its eyes.

Kale growled. “It’s waking up.”

“Then let’s go.”

The last mooring dropped.

Cash: “Hoverlift incoming. ETA twenty seconds. You’d better have the vault ready to ride.”

We pushed. Hard.

The vault moved—slowly, grinding—then hovered up as the lift clamped underneath. It beeped in a happy tone. A smiling donut logo appeared on the display: “DELIVERY MODE: ACTIVATED.”

“Please tell me you stole this from a bakery,” I said.

Cash: “Pastry courier. It had the weight rating.”

“Of course it did.”

We rolled the vault toward the service stairwell—still shielded, still clear.

Behind us, we heard footsteps.

Then yelling.

Then a child’s voice: “HEY! THE CLOWN TOOK DADDY’S BOX!”

Ricardo turned. Bowed. Blew a kiss. “Happy birthday.”

And we ran.

We burst out of the Toussaint Center’s service exit like a glitch in a circus.

Kale and I were at the front, pushing the vault on its whining hoverlift. Ricardo skipped backward behind us, flinging glitter into the air like a trail of breadcrumbs, grinning like he’d just stolen the moon.

Behind us, the birthday party had gone full apocalypse.

Spiritual sirens shrieked.

Wards shattered like glass.

A man made entirely of ash and feathers screamed something in Creole and hurled a spirit net toward Trent, who slipped in a puddle and somehow dodged it by sheer cowardly reflex.

Cash’s voice came through the comms: “I told you not to let Trent near the relic wall!”

“You said don’t touch it,” Trent yelled. “I breathed near it!”

“You sniffed it, you dumb salad!”

Kale swung the vault left, knocking over a ritual scarecrow holding a banner that said HAPPY 10TH NAOMI. The scarecrow burst into flames.

“I am never allowed at another child’s birthday,” I muttered.

“You say that like it’s bad,” Kale replied, grinning wild.

Ahead, the alley narrowed into the drop point. The Guillotine—Kale’s car—waited under a billboard of a crying android baby holding an energy drink. Its engine purred like it was ready to commit crimes on its own.

Michael stepped out from the shadows near the car, fists clenched. “Thirty seconds late.”

“We brought a vault on a bakery lift!” I yelled. “Be impressed!”

Then something landed behind us. Hard.

One of the Voodoo lieutenants—mask like a porcelain goat skull, eyes glowing red, robes stitched with charms—rose from a crouch and threw a tether toward the vault.

Ricardo stepped between the tether and the lift.

He held out a bubble wand.

Blew once.

A single iridescent bubble floated through the air—and reflected the tether back like a mirror of childhood and grief.

The Voodoo collapsed in a wailing heap of feathers.

Kale blinked. “Did you just bubble shield us?”

Ricardo wiped a tear. “He had unresolved mommy issues. The wand knows.”

Cash’s voice crackled in: “Get in the car, clowns. You’ve got twenty seconds before they bring out the spirit dogs.”

“SPIRIT DOGS?!” Trent shrieked.

We shoved the vault onto a rear-mounted tow rig Kale had welded on just for this. The Guillotine groaned under the weight but held.

I climbed in shotgun. Ricardo vaulted into the back, laughing. Michael hit the wheel of the Soupwagon to create a diversion—straight through a line of parked spirit cycles.

It worked.

So did the bounce house exploding behind us. No one’s quite sure how.

Kale peeled out, tires screaming.

The vault sang softly behind us, like it knew a lullaby for criminals.

I looked over at Kale.

His eyes were wild. Adrenaline high.

“Never let me plan again,” he said breathless.

“Deal,” I replied. “You’re banned.”

He grinned wider.

“I’m still not letting anyone else drive this car, though.”

“I was never going to ask.”

He looked like he wanted to say something else.

Then the vault hummed again.

And for a second—just a second—I thought I heard it whisper my name.

The vault sat in the middle of the war room like a smug corpse.

Scorched, scraped, humming low and slow, sigils pulsing faintly along its sides like it was breathing. Kale had insisted on parking it on one of Ricardo’s beanbags for “aesthetic anchoring.” Ricardo cried. Not from sentiment—just because he liked that beanbag.

We gathered around it like villagers around a mysterious egg.

Cash was already on the floor, jacked into the reader ports with three datacables in his neck and one toe tapping out binary frustration.

"It's not talking to me," he muttered. "Like, at all."

"Use your sexy voice," Ricardo suggested.

"I am."

Trent tried poking it with a stun baton. It sparked. He screamed and threw the baton into the kitchen sink.

Michael stood with arms crossed, staring at it like it might reveal its sins under pressure.

Kale paced, grumbling. "I can cut it open. Give me time, five plasma saws, and a war hymn."

"You couldn't even open a safe at a strip club last week," I said.

"That lock was cursed!"

Cash sat up. "Okay, so—update. The locking mechanism's hybrid: neural ID, keyed to one specific biosignature."

"Translation?" I asked.

"We need the actual hand of someone high-ranking in the Voodoo org chart. Like, a boss. Papa Gris-Gris or someone in his line."

"Alive or dead?" Ricardo asked.

Cash shrugged. "The system reads biomaterial. Could go either way."

"So we're talking about... theft," Michael said slowly. "Of a body part."

"Technically," Cash replied, "we've already committed seven felonies, four spiritual offenses, and one culinary war crime."

"We are not eating the vault," Ricardo said quickly.

"Glad we're drawing lines now," Michael muttered.

Kale cracked his neck. "So we go back. Find one. Grab it."

"You mean his hand," I said.

"Or hers. I'm not picky."

"No," I said. "But they will be."

Everyone turned to look at me.

I was sitting on the vault now, legs crossed, still wearing the glitter from the party. It vibrated gently beneath me. Just enough to feel like breath.

I ran my palm across the surface.

The humming got louder in my head.

Like it was calling. Not with sound—but weight.

Kale tilted his head. “Kar?”

“It’s fine,” I lied.

Ricardo crouched beside me, peering up. “What’s it saying?”

“I didn’t say it was—”

“You’re doing the ‘haunted furniture’ face,” Cash said.

“I don’t have a haunted furniture face.”

“You do,” Michael added quietly. “It’s your ‘something’s wrong and I’m not telling you yet’ look.”

I stood up fast.

“Okay,” I said. “We need a plan. We’ve got the vault, we’ve got leverage, and we’ve got time.”

“Do we?” Ricardo whispered.

I ignored him.

“Cash,” I said, pointing. “Start building a scanner that can mimic it. Maybe we don’t need the actual hand. Maybe we can fake it.”

Cash grinned. “I love when you believe in science.”

“I don’t. I just hate blood.”

Michael nodded once. “We’ll need locations. Voodoo patrols. Movement patterns.”

Kale cracked his knuckles. “And I’ll start sharpening the bone saw.”

“Don’t name it this time,” Ricardo said.

“She’s called Handsy.”

Trent raised a hand. “Can I be bait again?”

Everyone: “NO.”

The vault hummed again.

I didn't tell them it had whispered this time.

Not a name.

Just one word.

Hunger.

Oops! All Murder

The meeting started like all Goonz meetings do: with yelling, snacking, and one deeply questionable weapon on the table.

"This is not a hand theft," I said. "It's a surgical borrowing."

Ricardo raised a finger, chewing on a glowstick. "Can we call it a hand liberation?"

"No," Michael said flatly. "We are not branding this."

Cash spun the cleaver on the table like it was a fidget toy from hell. "You sure you're okay doing this, Kar?"

"I'm not going to kill him," I said. "I just knock him out. Kale gets the hand. We leave. Fast. Quiet. Clean."

Kale snorted. "You're clumsy as hell."

"And yet you trust me with your car."

"That's emotional weakness. Entirely different."

Trent, lounging in the corner with a tactical soda, held up a finger. "So we're just pretending the murder part doesn't exist?"

"It's not murder," I snapped. "We're removing a tool. He gets to live. Hopefully with a new appreciation for left-handedness."

Cash tapped on the datasheet, bringing up a ritual calendar. "He's scheduled for a personal communion night at the Old Fire Station shrine, no guards, high incense density, psychic shielding for solo meditation. No one's allowed in during that block. Perfect for an ambush."

Kale leaned in, sharpening the cleaver against a humming whetstone. “This baby’ll take it clean at the wrist. Might even leave the bone singing.”

“Don’t say that,” Ricardo said. “Ever again.”

“I’m just saying—it’s a surgical dream. You knock him, I snip, we zip.”

I stared at the weapon.

Big. Wicked curve. Meant for kitchen horrors, not spiritual extraction.

“I’m using the pipe,” I said. “Not that.”

“Fine,” Kale grunted. “But the cleaver stays on standby.”

Michael, standing at the back of the room, finally spoke: “You sure you’re okay, Kar?”

I looked at him.

Tried to keep my face still.

“I’ve done worse,” I lied.

He didn’t believe me.

Thirty minutes later, I stood in the garage, staring at the pile of gear: gloves, burner phone, false ID charm, stun patches, and the pipe—weighted, wrapped in grip tape, about half a meter long. It felt right in my hands.

Kale leaned against the Guillotine, watching me. Shirtless again. His comfort zone.

“Don’t screw it up,” he said.

“I never do.”

He raised a brow.

I scowled. “That wasn’t permission to list examples.”

He held out the cleaver in a sheath. “Just in case.”

I rolled my eyes, took it, and slid it into my hip bag.

“Not using it,” I muttered.

“Sure you’re not.”

Ricardo popped his head in from behind the lift, holding a bundle of purple herbs. “I made you a protective charm. Smells like candy and death!”

I took it. “Thanks, storm-boy.”

“Don’t haunt us if it goes wrong.”

“I make no promises.”

Later, standing outside the Old Fire Station shrine beneath a moon thick with smoke and streetlight distortion, I felt the pipe in one hand... and the cleaver shifting in the other.

This was going to be easy.

Clean.

Quiet.

Right?

The ritual smoke was thicker than I’d expected.

It clung to the ground, rolled against the walls, made the whole shrine feel like the belly of a breathing beast. Light moved wrong inside it. Sound echoed too early. Nothing trusted its own timing.

I moved slow.

The Old Fire Station had been gutted years ago. No fire poles, no trucks. Just a wide-open hall where the floor used to hum with wheels and yelling. Now the walls were lined with charm-ropes, flickering spirit lights, feathers. Drums hung upside-down from the ceiling. One of them throbbed slightly as I passed.

At the center of it all: Papa Gris-Gris.

Kneeling, back turned.

He was a mountain of a man, even folded down like that. Bare arms marked with glowing script. Back draped in layered cloth and prayer bones. His head was bowed, hands open on his knees.

I heard his breathing.

Low. Steady. Anchored.

A whisper in my ear—not his voice, not mine. Just the room exhaling.

Do not interrupt the communion.

I ignored it.

Tiptoed around the outer ring, counting the steps like we rehearsed.

Sixteen. Right hand ready. Pipe in the bag. Swing from the side, not from behind. Avoid the neck. Crack the temple. Out in twenty.

My hands were shaking. I told myself it was the fog. The heat. The weight of a job done right.

He whispered something in a language I didn't know. His voice sounded old. Like it had come through too many mouths to remember the first.

I crouched.

Reached into my bag.

Fingers wrapped around the grip. Cold. Heavy. Weighted forward.

One deep breath.

Go.

I moved fast—stepped in behind him, raised my arm, eyes locked on the side of his head.

Then swing—

A wet noise.

Thicker than I expected. Heavy. Final.

He didn't slump.

He dropped.

Straight down like a puppet with the strings cut. Collapsed in a heap of color and cloth.

I froze.

The cleaver was in my hand.

Blood sprayed the altar.

For one long second, there was no sound except the wind.

Then—

You killed him.

Not a whisper. Not a thought. A voice. From the wall. From the bones. From something above me that no longer blinked.

I looked down.

Papa Gris-Gris didn't move.

Didn't breathe.

Didn't twitch.

I'd missed the temple.

I'd hit the base of the skull.

Too low.

Too clean.

Too deep.

I stepped back. Dropped the cleaver. Stared at my shaking hands.

Then turned.

Outside the hall, down the corridor, I saw Kale's silhouette.

Waiting.

He hadn't seen it yet.

I looked back once, just once.

And the corpse's mouth was open.

Like it was laughing.

I walked into the House of Hoodlums like a malfunctioning meat drone.

The door creaked. My boots dragged. My hoodie stuck to my arms like regret. The cleaver was back in the bag. The hand—wrapped in two layers of linen and sealed inside a bio-pouch—hung off my belt like a cursed lunch.

No one was in the war room.

Good.

I dropped the pouch on the table and collapsed into Ricardo's beanbag—its fluff depleted from the vault incident—and let my soul leak out of my ears.

A moment passed.

Then footsteps. Loud ones.

Kale.

He walked in, saw the pouch, saw my face, and immediately said:

“You killed him.”

I didn’t answer.

He grinned like a kid who just found out Santa was real and violent.

“Holy dreck. You actually offed him. You killed Papa Gris-Gris?!”

Behind him, Trent peeked in. “Wait, for real?”

“Bro,” Kale said, still laughing, “she cleavered his whole skull.”

Cash poked his head through the doorway. “Did she? Oh my god. Oh my god.”

I buried my face in the beanbag.

Kale threw his head back and howled.

“I knew you’d kriff it somehow, but I figured—like, a broken nose, maybe a seizure. Not cleaver to the cranium!”

Ricardo glided in like a spirit with jazz hands.

“ANNOUNCING: KARYNA THE BUTCHER! Slayer of shrines! Duchess of decapitation!”

“It wasn’t a decapitation,” I muttered.

Ricardo bowed. “Then Madame Skullsplitter, apologies.”

Trent clapped once. “This is why she’s our leader.”

“I’m not the leader.”

“Not with that attitude,” Cash said, already setting up the scanner.

Kale pulled a chair over and straddled it backwards, grinning so hard his face looked like a broken emoticon.

“I told you not to kill him. You told me you wouldn’t kill him.”

“I didn’t mean to,” I said, muffled by beanbag and shame.

“That’s even better!”

Ricardo plopped down beside me and handed me a juice box.

“For the trauma,” he said solemnly.

I drank it in one pull.

Cash was trying to create a slideshow titled “Karyna’s Murder Arc” using stills from security footage they didn’t even have.

Ricardo was humming a remix of the death scene like it was a club track.

Trent was sketching t-shirt designs that ranged from “offensive” to “absolutely cancelable.”

And then Kale walked in, holding a drink like he was the bartender at the worst bar in hell.

“Here,” he said, sliding it onto the table in front of me. “It’s called the Skullsplitter Royale. Glow soda, cherry stim syrup, and half a cap of something I forgot to label.”

I stared at the glass.

The liquid inside looked like someone melted a rave.

“Is there roofie in this,” I asked flatly, “or just the emotional suggestion of it?”

He blinked. “What? No! What the hell?”

“Just checking.”

Kale threw up his hands. “I’m trying to be nice. You committed a high-value, low-effort, semi-glorious hit. That deserves a drink.”

“It was supposed to be a tap to the skull, not a full-body farewell tour.”

Ricardo clapped. “And yet he’s gone to the big spirit swamp in the sky! A true efficiency queen.”

Cash spun in his chair. “Look, what matters is: we got the hand. The hand works. And you’re officially the most terrifying person here.”

“Second most,” Kale muttered.

“Third,” Michael added from the corner, sipping a protein pouch like death itself.

I picked up the glass. It was cold. Sweating. Vibrating slightly—maybe from my hand, maybe from the ingredients. I took a long sip.

Too sweet. Too loud.

Perfect.

Ricardo leaned in. “Are you okay?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Liar.”

“Yup.”

“Cool.”

I smiled.

It felt like I’d stapled it on.

Cash laid the hand on the sensor like it was a credit chit and not part of a dead man’s legacy.

“Pulse lines are still warm,” he said. “Echo signature holding. This should work.”

We were all gathered in the war room, circled around the vault like it might tell a bedtime story.

Kale was bouncing on his heels, itching for the lid to blow.

Trent was holding a popsicle he hadn’t touched since I walked in with blood on my face.

Michael stood behind the couch, arms folded, stone-faced as ever.

I sat cross-legged on the floor, trying not to shake.

The hand pressed flat. The scanner hissed.

BIO-ID VERIFIED.

The lights on the vault flickered blue. Then green.

With a slow hydraulic hiss and a clunk like a body dropping, the lid began to open.

A puff of freezing air rolled out—cold like meat storage

Inside was—

“Not drugs,” Cash said, frowning.

“Definitely not drugs,” Kale added, peering in.

We crowded around.

The vault’s interior was padded with gel insulator foam, but what sat in it was... bizarre.

Not bricks. Not bags.

Just items.

- A small box made of fused bone, etched with circuitry.

- A clear plastic tube holding a tightly rolled sheet of human skin, inked in red with prayer-code.
- A hexdrive frozen in a block of resin shaped like a jaw.
- Several teeth. Each one etched with a sigil.
- And at the center: a silver cylinder humming with power, wrapped in a child's hospital bracelet.

Ricardo whispered, "This smells like math."

Cash didn't touch anything. "This is biotech. Codified bloodwork. Embedded memory constructs. Maybe even spirit-bound data."

"Translation?" Kale asked.

"This is some deep, high-shelf voodoo tech. Prototypical. Illegal on eight continents. Meant to be activated, not sold."

"Activated how?"

"Don't know. But I don't like the bracelet."

We all stared at the silver cylinder. It vibrated like it had a heartbeat.

Kale reached toward it.

I slapped his hand away.

"Do not touch that."

He blinked. "What, you wanna touch it first?"

"No," I said. "I think it wants me to."

They all turned.

"What?"

Ricardo's voice dropped to a murmur. "Kar..."

I stood up. Fast. Backed away from the vault.

Because just then, the shard—my shard—lit up from inside the sugar tin, pulsing in sync with the cylinder.

The lights in the room dimmed.

And for the first time since we cracked the lid, I heard something in the back of my head say:

"Zero"

The cylinder was humming.

Not loud. Not mechanical. It was a deep-note hum, the kind you feel in your teeth. Cash scanned it with every sensor he had, and all the readings came back contradictory—like it was tech and not tech at the same time.

“It’s vibrating in seven frequencies,” he said. “That’s not even legal.”

“What’s it doing?” Trent asked.

“Responding,” Cash muttered.

“To what?”

I didn’t say anything.

But I knew the answer.

It was responding to me.

The shard in the sugar tin flared again.

A soft, rosy light—like blushing glass. No power source. No signal. Just presence.

Ricardo was crouched beside the vault, watching the pulse move from the cylinder... to the teeth... to the bone box... then right back to the shard.

“Guys,” he said softly. “I think it’s singing.”

Cash tilted his head. “That’s data vibration. A sonic call-response. Like it’s confirming identity.”

“Whose identity?” Michael asked.

Ricardo pointed—at me.

Everyone looked.

I backed up. “I didn’t—”

“You brought the shard,” Kale said, slow.

“I thought it was just data.”

“It recognized you,” Michael said.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“No,” Ricardo said. “But it knows who you are.”

Then the house flickered.

Lights—every light—shuddered once, like the walls had blinked.

The servers coughed. Monitors glitched. The war room display screen rolled into static with a quick gasp of power loss.

Cash yelled, “I just re-calibrated those!”

Michael stepped forward, hand on his weapon. “Power dip?”

“No,” Cash said. “That was intentional. Something just rolled through our grid.”

Kale pulled out a knife. “If this vault’s haunted, I swear I’ll marry it and kill it in the same day.”

Then we heard it:

Static on the intercom.

First a pop.

Then a low, dragging whisper.

Kale spun toward it. “Did it say something?”

Ricardo nodded, slow. “Said her name.”

Everyone looked at me again.

“I didn’t hear anything,” I lied.

They stared.

The hum faded.

Lights returned to normal.

Cash sat down, pale. “I don’t like this vault anymore.”

“Let’s close it,” Trent said quickly. “Let’s lock it back up and throw it into the river.”

“River’s already cursed,” Kale muttered.

I stood still. Frozen.

Because while they argued, I heard it again.

This time in my head.

Not from the vault.

Not from the shard.

But from somewhere inside me.

You've come home.

The House of Hoodlums was quiet.

Too quiet.

No bass from Ricardo's room. No flickering lights from Cash's late-night drone races. No screaming from Trent about a bug he hallucinated on the ceiling.

Just me.

Just the garage.

The cleaver hung from the tool rack where I'd put it—cleaned, dried, and glinting in the moon-colored spill of overhead light.

I stared at it.

Not like a weapon.

More like a mirror.

It didn't feel like it had killed anyone. It felt like an object. Cold. Dumb. Blameless.

I wasn't sure if I could say the same about myself.

I reached out. Touched the blade.

It didn't bite.

But it felt... warm.

I pulled my hand back fast.

Laughed once. Dry. Short. The kind of laugh people do when they realize a nightmare isn't over—it's just paused.

Behind me, in the dark, I could almost hear them still laughing.

Karyna the Butcher.

Princess Cleaver.

A walking accident with knives in her heart and glitter in her hair.

I wasn't crying.

But I wanted to.

I sat down on the floor, back to the wall, eyes on the cleaver.

And said aloud, "I didn't mean to do it."

The garage didn't answer.

The shadows didn't move.

The vault, in the other room, hummed once. Distant. Like it was breathing in its sleep.

I whispered, "I'm not sorry."

Then added, quieter, "But maybe I should be."

And I stayed there for a long time.

Not talking.

Just listening.

Lights Like Teeth

The warehouse the rave was at looked like it had once hosted an illegal surgery and never cleaned up afterward.

Rust stained the ceiling. Wires hung like vines. The lights flickered in seizure-time, pulsing through smoke machines and sweat. Music pounded—industrial bass, low and hungry, vibrating through the soles of our boots.

It smelled like blood, sex, and fruit vape.

Home, in a way.

Ricardo was already bouncing. "I want seven drugs and at least two regrets."

Michael just nodded once and peeled off toward the back.

Cash followed, cracking his neck. "Don't wait up. I'm making chemical choices."

They vanished into the lounge—a velvet cave lit by red glowpanels and fog, the air sticky with narcotics and half-heard conversations. The rules there were simple: bring drugs, don't touch, forget your name.

Kale, Trent, and I stayed by the bar for a moment, adjusting.

Trent was in a mesh tank top that said Cursed and Thirsty. He'd already begun grinding on a group of strangers who didn't seem to notice.

I nursed a neon green drink with a little plastic noose dangling off the straw.

Kale didn't drink.

He just watched me.

The DJ switched tracks. Heavier. Dirtier. Something with teeth in the bass.

I tossed back the rest of my drink.

"Let's dance," I said.

Kale blinked. "You don't usually—"

"Shut up. Let's go."

I pulled him toward the crowd, weaving through thrashing bodies, lights strobed in white and violet. Someone sprayed mist overhead that smelled like bleach and lavender.

And for a second—

Just a second—

I didn't feel like someone who'd murdered a spiritual patriarch with a kitchen tool.

I felt normal.

Dizzy. Hot. Empty. Perfect.

I let my body move. Didn't think about rhythm. Didn't care who was watching.

But someone was.

I felt him before I saw him.

A shadow at the edge of the crowd.

Still.

Focused.

Like he'd been waiting.

He didn't walk through the crowd so much as appear inside it—tallish, thin, inked up to the eyes.

Tattoos scattered up from his hands up neck and over one cheek and above his eyebrow, they went trailing under his jawline in a script I couldn't read. Some kind of sad boy spellwork. Hair like a short platinum shag. He wore a black and white striped shirt with "SUICIDAL" embroidered in silver, and black pants with the knees ripped out.

His eyes were dark. Maybe just empty.

And when he looked at me, I forgot what beat we were dancing to.

He didn't smile.

Didn't move.

Just stared.

Like he'd seen me before.

Then, slowly—like a test—he stepped toward me.

Right through the pulse of the strobes.

I didn't flinch.

He didn't ask.

He just moved to the beat beside me, then in front of me, then with me—no small talk, no smirk, no "hey, you're hot." Just motion. Tight, sharp, practiced but chaotic. Like a fight choreographed as a dance.

I mirrored him. Let my arms fall loose, let the music eat the part of me that cared.

It wasn't sexual. Not yet.

It was worse: magnetic.

Felt natural.

His presence felt like a good memory.

Every motion, closer.

Our hands never touched.

But our shoulders brushed.

And when his mouth curled—just slightly—I realized I didn’t care what his name was.

My brain melted into my heart.

I wanted to see what his body could do when words weren’t an option.

Behind us, Kale stood maybe three meters back. Arms folded. Not dancing. Not smiling.

His eyes locked on the boy like he was a grenade without a pin.

I caught his gaze once.

He looked away.

I turned back.

“Bathroom?” the sadboy said in my ear. First thing he’d said all night.

I nodded.

Didn’t hesitate.

Didn’t ask.

Didn’t look back.

The bathroom smelled like wet paint, expired antiseptic, and bad choices.

Graffiti layered the walls like ancient curses—names, sigils, eyes, phone numbers scratched out with keys. One mirror was cracked. The other was missing. A single fluorescent tube flickered overhead, buzzing like it knew the end of the world was happening in this stall.

The door slammed.

He didn’t say anything.

Neither did I.

We crashed into each other like two frequencies trying to cancel each other out. His hands were cold, quick. Mine were shaking but not from nerves—from adrenaline.

There was no music in here, just the sound of our breath, the thump of bass leaking through the walls like a dying heartbeat.

He pressed me back against the stall door, mouth on my neck, fingers at my waistband, tattooed knuckles ghosting over my skin.

His lips were soft. His breath tasted like cheap liquor and nicotine gum.

He said something—I don’t remember what. Maybe nothing. Maybe my name.

I kissed him harder to shut it up.

We didn't fully undress, just enough.

My nails dug into his back. His hand pulled my thigh up and—
slam.

Fast.

Clumsy.

Ugly in the right ways.

I didn't think of Papa Gris-Gris.

I didn't think of the vault.

I didn't think of Kale.

Except... for one flicker.

When the boy bit my shoulder—

Not sad.

Not angry.

Just bliss

And somehow, that was worse.

After, the sadboy licked a stripe of blood off my collarbone and said, "You don't smile much."

"I don't pretend well," I replied, breathless.

He zipped up. Adjusted his shirt. Didn't kiss me, but I think he wanted to.

"You want my name?" he asked, not really offering.

"No."

"Good."

He left first.

I stayed.

Long enough to breathe.

Long enough to wipe my hands on the graffiti.

Long enough to look in the cracked mirror and see myself—

wild-eyed, hair mussed, neck red, soul god-knows-where.

I laughed once.

Then left.

When I stepped back onto the floor, the music had changed.

Darker now. Slower. Like the night was winding down but the chemicals hadn't told anyone yet.

Kale stood near the edge of the crowd, drink in hand, sweat clinging to his jaw like regret. His eyes tracked me the second I stepped out of the crowd, straight from the hallway, no mystery where I'd been.

He didn't speak.

Didn't blink.

Didn't need to.

I walked past him without a word. Grabbed another drink off the tray of a passing rave runner—some glowing orange thing that tasted like a mistake.

He followed.

Outside, the air was cold. Wet with city breath. The warehouse walls bled graffiti under the streetlights like infected wounds.

I leaned against the bricks, daydreaming.

Kale finally said, "You didn't even know his name."

"Is that a rule now?"

"No. But you could've at least looked at me after."

"I didn't do it at you, Kale."

"You think that's better?"

His voice wasn't angry. Not loud. Just—low. Burned down to the coals.

I looked at him.

At his clenched jaw. His fists buried in his jacket pockets. The muscle twitching in his cheek.

He wasn't heartbroken.

He was ashamed.

And I realized—he wasn't mad that I did it.

He was mad that it didn't seem to cost me anything.

So I said, "Why do you care? You've got a whole folder of club girls who let you name their bruises."

"That's not the same."

"Why? Because I didn't kiss him? Or because I didn't ask your permission?"

His silence cracked something in me.

I stepped forward, close enough to smell the fire gel still in his collar.

"You wanna say something, Kale?" I asked. "Say it."

He didn't.

So I laughed.

Bitter. Short.

Then turned and walked away.

He didn't follow.

Didn't stop me.

Just let me go, fists still in his pockets, like he was holding back a weapon made of himself.

We met back at the van around four a.m.

Michael looked like he'd been through a thunderstorm and three existential crises. Cash was halfway asleep on a bag of ice. Trent had glitter in his eyes and was bragging about getting slapped. Kale hadn't spoken since the alley.

Ricardo leaned against the door of the Soupwagon, slurping a fizzy drink and staring up at the broken sky.

"I saw your bathroom boy again," he said, voice dreamy.

I froze halfway into the passenger seat. "Where?"

"Private booth. Up on the catwalk. He wasn't dancing. Just... watching."

"Watching what?"

"You."

That got everyone's attention.

Michael straightened. “And you’re just telling us this now?”

Ricardo shrugged. “Didn’t seem urgent. Until he pulled out a photo.”

My chest got tight. “Of me?”

Ricardo nodded. “Showed it to some guy in a synth-fur coat. Said something. Then they split.”

Kale’s eyes flicked toward me. Jaw clenched. Said nothing.

Cash stirred. “You think he’s a scout?”

“Or a freak with an interest,” Trent offered, then immediately regretted it when everyone looked at him like he farted in a sermon.

Ricardo sipped his drink. “He wasn’t just some sadboy, Kar. He had a vibe.”

“What kind of vibe?” I asked.

“Designed.”

That hit me harder than I wanted to admit.

I didn’t say anything.

Just climbed into the van. Sat in the dark. Let the engine hum around me like the inside of a vault.

And I thought about his eyes.

How calm they were.

How he never asked my name.

Because he already knew it.

The Siren Game

“I wanna make ‘em cry,” Kale said, mouth full of something vaguely crunchy and almost certainly expired. “I want tears. Public embarrassment. Ideally... pants-wetting.”

“Can we make ‘em sing?” Trent asked, sprawled across the war table in one of Kale’s stolen tank tops. “Like, actual singing, not screams?”

Cash spun a pen between his fingers. “Security audits start tomorrow at 0900. They’ll be running on half-system diagnostics. Easy to brute-force the garage doors. Harder to spoof the fleet tags.”

Michael nodded. “Doable if we get a relay node into their antenna array.”

Ricardo stood dramatically and spread his arms like a stage magician with no shirt and too many necklaces.

“I have just the track,” he declared. “I’ve been waiting my whole life to weaponize Britney.”

Kale clapped once. “You’re not singing ‘Toxic.’”

“I am,” Ricardo said. “It’s part of my healing arc.”

I sat with my legs pulled up in a half-lotus, sipping a soda I didn’t even taste. Everyone was laughing. Talking fast. Ricocheting off each other like pinballs and bad decisions. Plans were being drawn. Timers set. Rigs checked.

And I wasn’t really there.

Not fully.

In my head, he was still dancing.

That boy.

That ink-covered pretty mistake.

The feel of his breath. The way he didn’t ask.

The way I never gave him a name—and he never needed one.

Kale dropped a data tab in front of me. “Kar? You still in there?”

I blinked. Looked at him. Tried to pull on a smirk.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sorry. Zoned out.”

“You good to run point on the decoy drop?”

“Of course.”

Ricardo leaned in with a conspiratorial wink. “You dreaming about your deadboy? You got that ‘kissed by a cursed ghost’ look.”

“Do not call him that.”

“Ooh, she likes him,” Trent cooed.

I flipped them both off without looking up.

But yeah.

I was thinking about him.

And I didn't know why.

The staging point was a maintenance tunnel under 17th and Quinton—half flooded, half collapsed, fully illegal. Smelled like ammonia and crushed dreams.

We moved like ghosts.

Ricardo climbed the service ladder with his backpack of speakers and sins. Cash handled the jammers. Kale and Michael prepped the exit route. I was supposed to plant the decoy drop: a package labeled "Audit Samples - Clearance 7 Only" filled with confetti, stinkbombs, and a single flashing middle finger hologram.

I held the package.

Stared at it.

Didn't move.

Kale passed by and clapped my shoulder, a little too hard. "Kar. Package."

"Right," I muttered.

I moved up the tunnel. Counted steps like I'd been trained.

But my rhythm was off.

Five.

Seven.

Wait, was it eight?

You don't smile much.

His voice. Back again. Not a memory. Not quite.

Just under my ears.

I blinked. Realized I'd passed the trigger point. Swore under my breath, doubled back.

Planted the drop just in time for Cash to ping the garage's gatecode scramble.

"Fifteen seconds to lock," he muttered.

I slid back down the ladder.

Ricardo was already singing under his breath, warming up his falsetto.

Kale caught me before I hit the ground and narrowed his eyes.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine. You look like you took Pink and regret it.”

I forced a smirk. “Just tired.”

He didn’t push it.

But he didn’t look away either.

“Goonz, prepare to roll,” Cash said.

We scattered.

As the signal activated and the precinct’s lights began flashing in glorious seizure pattern, I felt a smile start to climb my face.

And then—there it was.

His face.

In the back of my brain.

His eyes.

Stillness like hunger.

The way he looked at me—not like a girl he wanted.

Like a problem he’d already solved.

The lockout hit like a panic attack.

Every cruiser in the Midtown garage lit up at once—siren lights flashing, internal alarms shrieking, floodlights pulsing in seizure-time.

Then the real masterpiece kicked in.

“Baby, can’t you see... I’m calling...”

Ricardo’s voice, raw and unapologetic, blasted through every station loudspeaker. Off-key. Overconfident. Pitch-shifted slightly by the feed delay.

“A guy like you should wear a warning...”

We were already halfway down the storm drain when the screaming started.

Not from us.

From the cops.

“WHO THE HELL IS—IS THAT—TURN THAT OFF!”

“It’s dangerous... I’m fallin’...”

Kale was laughing so hard he nearly tripped over his own feet.

Cash clutched the signal jammer to his chest like it was a newborn.

Trent howled, “I’M GONNA CRY. THEY’RE ACTUALLY PANICKING.”

Ricardo somersaulted through the exit tunnel, yelling, “I WAS BORN FOR THIS!”

Michael just jogged in silence, the smallest grin pulling at the edge of his mouth.

I was laughing too.

Really laughing.

For the first time in... I don’t know. Since before the vault. Before the cleaver. Before him.

We burst out into the alley behind a neon noodle bar and kept running. The noise echoed behind us, bouncing off the alley walls like some divine joke.

“TOO HIGH—CAN’T COME DOWN—LOSING MY HEAD, SPINNIN’ ‘ROUND AND ‘ROUND...”

I stopped for just a second. Turned to look.

Red and blue strobes painted the skyline. Distant shouts bled into the air.

The cops were losing their minds.

We were ghosts in the storm.

And for once, I felt clean.

Almost.

We ducked into the alley behind the rusted back-end of a tea bar that never served tea, just pills in ceramic mugs.

Steam hissed from a busted wall pipe. The pavement was wet, broken. Somewhere, a rat screamed like it was arguing with God.

Cash collapsed against a dumpster and lit a stim cig with a trembling hand. “That... was art.”

Ricardo did finger guns at no one. “I told you. I bring the glitter. I bring the gospel.”

Michael took his usual perimeter position—eyes scanning, mouth silent.

Kale paced in tight little arcs, still giggling under his breath. “Do you think they’ve found the part where we flooded the breakroom with glow ink yet?”

Trent pulled off his tank top and wrung it out like he’d been baptized in sin. “I’m so happy I could lick a drone.”

I leaned against the alley wall. Closed my eyes.

Let my chest rise. Fall.

The night pressed in around us like velvet soaked in battery acid.

And then—

A tingle. That specific tingle.

The kind you get when you know someone’s staring and you haven’t decided whether to like it yet.

I opened my eyes.

Turned.

There.

At the end of the alley. Just past the steam.

A figure.

Slim.

Still.

Watching.

I knew it was him.

Even without light, even without tattoos or that glow—I knew.

Then a truck rolled by, blocking the view for half a second.

When it passed, he was gone.

Vanished.

Like a skipped frame in a dirty reel.

I didn't move.

Didn't say a word.

Ricardo threw an arm around my shoulders. "You okay, Duchess Death?"

"Peachy," I said.

"Don't lie to me with that sexy trauma voice," he said, kissing my cheek sloppily. "I see you."

I forced a grin.

But my hand itched.

And I could still feel his eyes on the back of my neck.

The House was quiet.

Ricardo was passed out half-off the couch, glitter on his eyelids like disco bruises. Cash was snoring under the table. Kale's bedroom door was shut—no music, no footsteps.

I sat in the war room.

Alone.

Lights dimmed low.

Just me, a sketchpad, and a cup of fake tea I hadn't touched.

The page in front of me was full of half-finished sketches—eyes, cheekbones, that curve of neck ink like it meant something.

I didn't draw well.

Didn't care.

I needed to remember him.

And the more I sketched, the more one tattoo stood out.

Left side of his neck. Small. Angular. Looked like a triangle crossed with a barcode.

I drew it three times.

Then I stopped.

Stared at it.

Something about it itched in my brain. Familiar.

I slid open the encrypted drive.

Old job files.

Intel from a half-failed run six months back—some biotech archive in Little Prague we were supposed to grab for a corporate middleman who ghosted us right after.

I scrolled.

Paused.

Froze.

There.

The mark.

Not just similar.

Exact.

Filed under: Project Delphi / Blacksite 34.

Location: Tulsa sector. Status: Eliminated.

Client: Unknown. Tech Origin: VSymbio.

And a note in red at the bottom:

Do not engage with flagged carriers. Memory systems may be embedded. Consciousness-tracked.

My mouth went dry.

I looked back at my sketch.

He didn't ask my name.

Because he already had it.

Marked Memory

The war room smelled like recycled heat, instant noodles, and battery acid.

I stood in front of the table with my sketchpad open. Everyone else sat, slouched, or leaned against a wall—half-dressed, half-buzzed, fully themselves.

“This isn’t just a random hookup,” I said. “He knew who I was. Or what I was.”

I tapped the symbol—triangle, barcode—scrawled in thick pencil on the sketchpad.

Cash leaned in. “No way. That’s not street ink. That’s a corporate tag.”

“Project Delphi,” I said. “We jacked a file set six months ago for a client who ghosted. This tattoo was in the records.”

Michael grunted. “I remember. Symbio biotech. Blacksite-level genetic engineering.”

Ricardo sat up straighter. “You’re saying the sadboy wasn’t just creepin’—he was a carrier?”

Cash nodded. “Possible. If he’s been encoded, he could transmit through contact. Viral tech doesn’t need data ports. Just skin.”

Silence. Everyone thinking it.

I said it anyway. “I had sex with him.”

Trent oblivious. “Oh hell yeah.”

Cash snorted. “We’re all gonna get haunted.”

Michael said nothing.

Ricardo leaned forward, voice playful but sharp. “So what you’re saying is—he downloaded a parasite directly into your cooch.”

“I hate that sentence,” I said.

Then—

Kale, arms crossed, looking everywhere but at me, muttered:

“Okay, but why’d he have to fuck her, though?”

And the whole room turned.

Silence.

Like someone farted during a funeral.

Then Ricardo exploded.

“OH MY GOD, Kale’s mad the emo boy got there first!”

Cash pointed like he was witnessing history. “Kale, you jealous bitch! You want his number too?!”

Trent wheezed. “Kale, if you wanted to be corrupted by corporate spyware, just say so!”

Kale went red instantly. “That’s not what I meant.”

Michael finally cracked half a grin. “Sure it’s not.”

Kale stood up, defensive. “I’m saying it’s messed up! If it was recon, why go full-on seduction mode? Why not just—I dunno—shake her hand and vanish?!”

Ricardo laughed so hard he slapped the table. “This man said handshake. Bro thinks spycraft is fuckin’ LinkedIn.”

Kale groaned and rubbed his face. “You’re all idiots.”

“You’re in love,” Trent sang.

“I will commit crimes against humanity,” Kale muttered.

I stayed quiet through it all.

Not because I was embarrassed.

But because they were only half wrong.

The alley behind 10th Street smelled like rusted dreams and cheap spice.

Mura’s “office” was a derelict noodle cart, covered in paper charms and copper coils, wedged between a dentist and a pawnshop that sold haunted headphones.

She lived inside it.

Didn’t open the curtain when we arrived. Just barked, “Who’s dying and how fast?”

Ricardo leaned in toward the window. “Mura, it’s us.”

“Oh. The loud ones.”

A moment of clattering.

Then the curtain peeled back.

She wore goggles. Six lenses. Only two aimed at us. Her arms were wrapped in wire and code-stamped gauze. A wired rat sat on her shoulder, blinking in binary.

“Which of you brought the thing?”

I stepped forward. “We need your eyes on this.” I handed her the sketchpad.

She stared at it. Still.

Then—

She slapped it.

Once. Hard.

“This is Delphi-grade tech. Someone’s scratching old doors.”

Michael frowned. “You’ve seen it before?”

Mura snorted. “I sold it. Back when the corps were still pretending they didn’t know what it did. Back before it got black-bagged and buried. You know why they use this symbol?”

We shook our heads.

She traced it with a gnarled finger.

“It means return. As in, return to the source. It’s used for keys. Flesh keys.”

Kale narrowed his eyes. “So he’s not just carrying a payload.”

“He is the payload,” Mura hissed.

Cash stepped forward. “Could he trigger something in her?”

Mura tilted her head at me. Her lenses clicked, zoomed.

“He already did.”

I said nothing.

Just felt like the shard was inside me pulse.

Like it heard its name.

Mura blinked. “You’ve been tagged, girlie. And you ain’t just marked—you’re part of it. You’re built for it.”

Kale stepped between us. “What does that mean?”

Mura leaned back.

“You ever hear a song so familiar it made you cry and you didn’t know why?”

We nodded.

She tapped her temple.

“Your brain is singing back.”

Cash popped the encrypted data stick into the war table’s uplink port like he was defusing a bomb.

The lights dimmed.

The server array hummed.

The screen lit up with Mura’s cracked diagnostic software—a hot mess of corporate leakware, glitchy mandalas, and spinning glyphs that didn’t follow any legal syntax.

“Please tell me this won’t fry the drive,” Michael muttered.

Cash grinned. “No promises.”

He ran the scan.

A pulse of static swept across the screen.

Then it all lit up.

Three icons appeared:

>A labeled schematic of Karyna’s shard

>A digital reconstruction of the tattoo symbol from the emo boy’s neck

>And a third signal, labeled:

BIO-CONNECT // DESIGNATED NODE: KARYNA-K7

Ricardo blinked. “Wait. That’s... that’s you.”

Kale stood. “That’s her code signature. Like a node on a net.”

Cash zoomed in on the correlation lines. “It’s not just tracking. It’s matching. They’re running the same architecture. Shard, ink, and Kar? They’re part of a closed system.”

I stared at the screen.

My name, glowing beside something ancient. Something humming under my skin.

Cash said, “He didn’t choose you at random. He found you because he was programmed to.”

Ricardo stepped back, mock gasping. “You’ve got a stalker virus with feelings.”

Michael crossed his arms. “This is Delphi-level imprinting. It’s rare. You don’t infect someone like this unless you’re trying to unlock a function.”

Kale turned to me. “What did he say to you?”

“Not much.”

“Be specific.”

I swallowed.

“He said I don’t smile much.”

Cash looked back at the screen. “That’s a trigger phrase.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’ve written them. Corporate psych-ops use emotionally charged phrases to loosen mental firewalls. If it worked—he was the ignition.”

The screen blinked.

The shard’s icon pulsed.

Like it heard us.

I stood.

Quiet.

“Cash,” I said. “Can we turn it off?”

He hesitated.

Then shook his head.

“No. Whatever it is... it’s already running.”

The House was asleep again.

Cash was passed out in the armory with a protein bar in his mouth. Michael and Ricardo had vanished to the roof to stargaze and argue. Trent snored somewhere deep in his room, curled around a plush cat with one eye missing.

I slipped into the garage barefoot.

Closed the door behind me.

The shard was in my jacket pocket.

Still warm.

I held it in my palm, its surface flickering like a dark mirror, colorless until you stared too long—and then it was every color. Red that looked like memory. Blue that felt like loneliness. White that burned.

I sat down on the concrete. Cross-legged. Quiet.

And stared.

It pulsed once.

Twice.

Then opened.

Not physically.

Just—into me.

Images stuttered across my brain like a scratched tape:

* A white room.

* Surgical lights.

* A child—me—strapped to a table, mouth clamped open.

* A voice. Not mine. “Subject responds at 7.3 exposure.”

* Running in a field.

* Then darkness.

I gasped.

Not because it hurt.

Because it felt familiar.

The shard’s pulse shifted—soft now, like it was breathing with me.

I whispered, “What are you?”

And somewhere inside my skull, a voice replied—not alien, not mechanical.

Mine.

“You are what they left behind.”

I dropped it.

It hit the floor with a soft ping and rolled.

I crawled backward, heart pounding, sweat on my palms.

I wasn’t hallucinating.

I wasn’t dreaming.

I was remembering.

And whatever was in that shard—

It knew me better than I did.

The garage lights clicked on.

Soft yellow glow buzzing overhead.

I didn't look up.

I just sat there—knees pulled to my chest, breath shallow, the shard lying a few feet away like a landmine that already went off.

Boots stepped into view.

Kale.

He didn't speak right away.

Just crouched down across from me, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Kar," he said, gentle. "You okay?"

I shook my head.

He picked up the shard, turned it over in his hand, like he expected it to bite him.

"Did it show you something?"

I nodded.

"Bad?"

I laughed once. Short. Dry. "Worse than bad."

He tilted his head. "Want to tell me?"

I wanted to say no.

But my voice cracked instead. "I saw myself. Like—young. On a table. Wired up. Like a lab rat. They were putting something in me. Or on me. I don't know."

Kale's jaw clenched.

"Was it them?" he asked. "The corp? Delphi?"

"I think I was part of it."

He stood up. Paced a tight circle. Then knelt back down, closer this time.

“Kar. We gotta tell the others.”

“No.”

“They’ll want to help.”

“No,” I snapped. “They’ll want to dismantle me.”

Kale froze.

I looked him dead in the eyes. “You think Cash wouldn’t take me apart just to see how deep it goes? You think Michael wouldn’t suggest it’s safer to contain me?”

He didn’t answer.

Didn’t need to.

“I’m not ready,” I whispered. “They’re not ready.”

Kale nodded, slowly.

Then did something he never usually did.

He sat beside me.

Close. But didn’t touch.

Just said, “Then I’ll wait. With you.”

And for a second—

I wasn’t scared.

Just haunted.

Echo Protocol

“Say it one more time,” Michael said as he slapped a mop into the rolling bucket.

“We’re custodial contractors doing an unannounced ISO-17 sanitary compliance audit,” Cash repeated, adjusting his fake badge. “We’re not interested in police procedure, internal affairs, or what you keep in your desk drawer. We just clean, file a report, and leave.”

Ricardo stood next to him in a hi-vis vest that read “OFFICIAL CLEANING THUG” in hand-drawn sharpie. “Y’all ready to commit some janitorial espionage?”

“Born ready,” Trent said, dragging a mop that left a glitter trail behind it.

I adjusted my jumpsuit, pulled my cap low.

Kale hadn’t looked at me since we left the House.

Not once.

Which was maybe a blessing.

Michael tapped his earpiece. “Primary objective is sub-basement archives. Cash, Ricardo, and Trent stay on the ground floor and run noise. Me, Karyna, and Kale go under.”

We slipped past the front desk without issue—Cash charming the receptionist with a “we’ll be gone in two ticks, honeybun” and Ricardo waving like a children’s show mascot.

The elevators hummed low as they dropped toward the concrete undergut of the building.

Floor -3.

The air changed. Got heavier.

Kale adjusted his glove, finally speaking. “Archives are left, through the biometric checkpoint. Cash’s code should spoof the retinal.”

Michael stepped forward. Scanned his eye.

The door clicked open.

Inside, rows of glass lockers. Long filing corridors. Dim blue security lights that made the air feel chilled even though it wasn’t.

As we walked, something flickered.

A reflection.

Just a second.

But it wasn’t me.

It was younger.

Shorter hair. Hospital gown. Mouth open in a scream with no sound.

I froze.

Michael noticed. “Kar?”

“Fine,” I muttered. “Just tired.”

Kale glanced back, but said nothing.

We moved deeper in.

But in every polished surface—chrome, glass, lightshield—

I saw her.

Me.

And I wasn't sure anymore if she was a memory—

Or a warning.

There he was.

Across the alley.

High on a rooftop.

Sitting like he owned the skyline—legs crossed, head tilted, watching.

Same tattooed throat. Same silver chain. Same blank expression that somehow meant everything and nothing.

I stopped in the middle of the corridor.

Michael's voice buzzed faint in my ear: "Kar, you good? You're off path."

I tapped my mic. "Copy that. Minor detour. Be back in a sec."

"Define 'sec'—"

I killed the channel.

Slid through the maintenance hatch on the right. Up the stairwell. Out through the service door into open air.

The city hit me like breath after drowning.

And there he was—already at street level now, standing in the alley like he teleported.

He didn't move.

Didn't speak.

Just stared at me with eyes too still for someone alive.

I stepped forward. "You following me?"

His lips curled slightly. "Only when you want me to."

"Don't flatter yourself."

“I don’t need to,” he said. “You came anyway.”

I wanted to slap him.

I wanted to kiss him harder than last time.

I wanted to scream.

“You have answers,” I said.

“Sure,” he said. “You’re just always asking the wrong questions.”

I took a step closer.

“You gonna talk this time, or you gonna let me use you like a stress toy again?”

His smile widened.

“You think you’re using me?”

We were three feet apart.

Then two.

Then none.

I shoved him hard.

He barely moved.

“Say something real,” I said, my voice barely mine. “Tell me who you are.”

He leaned in, breath hitting my ear like a confession. “You already know.”

“I don’t know shit.”

“You know my name” he whispered.

“...Xero.”

The word felt like a wire pulled taut between my teeth and my spine.

He smiled.

And I hated him for it.

I kissed him like it was a threat.

He kissed me like it was old.

Like we’d done this before, maybe dozens of times, maybe in places I didn’t remember.

Maybe in lives I hadn't lived yet.

We tumbled sideways into the narrow gap behind a delivery dumpster—half-shielded from the street, half-swallowed by shadows.

His mouth was warm. His hands were cold.

His chain scraped my collarbone.

My mind screamed why are you doing this again? but my body answered shut up.

It felt the shard was inside me, felt it hum once, subtle, low.

Like it approved.

Or recognized him.

He didn't ask my name.

Didn't need to.

But before we pulled apart, I caught a flicker—just a moment—

His expression faltered.

Like he didn't want this either.

Like he was sorry, even as he grabbed my hips and pulled me closer.

That hurt more than it should've.

....

When it was over, readjusted his pants, he slid his hoodie back on, and said, "I'll see you soon, Kar."

I froze.

"I didn't tell you my name."

He didn't answer.

He was already walking.

The moment I stepped into the alley behind the precinct—

Michael was already waiting.

Arms crossed. Brow tight. Jaw tighter.

"I said 'a sec.' Not 'half a goddamn mission.'"

I gave him the blankest look I could fake. “Something came up.”

“Uh-huh.”

Inside the van, Cash was spread out across the back bench with three glowing drives in his lap like stolen candy. “So while you were gone, by the way, we cracked the sub-basement archive. Like real adults.”

Trent popped up from the front seat. “We almost got caught twice! It was thrilling!”

Ricardo peered over his shoulder from the driver’s seat. “You look flushed. You get chased or get laid?”

I didn’t answer.

“Oh my god,” he said, pointing. “She got fucked again. By the data ghost.”

“I didn’t—” I stopped. Breathed.

“I saw him.”

Cash looked up. “You *saw* him”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I... confronted him.”

Michael narrowed his eyes. “And that took two hours?”

Trent clutched his chest like an old widow. “Sweetie... he’s not gonna give you flowers and a firewall key.”

Ricardo howled. “Kar, he’s malware with abs.”

“Shut up,” I muttered.

“Did you at least ask him *anything* useful?” Michael asked.

I hesitated.

Ricardo fake-coughed. “She did not.”

Kale was quiet.

Didn’t say a word.

Didn’t look at me.

Didn’t even shift in his seat.

Just sat in the corner of the van, jaw tense, arms wrapped around himself like a bomb without a pin.

I felt that silence more than anything.

Kale stood up slow, still silent.

Walked out of the van.

Didn't say a word.

Didn't slam the door.

Just... vanished.

The garage door buzzed shut behind him.

Five full seconds of silence.

Then—

“SOMEONE PUT A VIOLIN ON.” Ricardo wailed. “KALE JUST WROTE HIMSELF INTO A SAD SONG.”

Trent wiped an invisible tear. “‘She picked the cyber himbo over me...’ This man is a goth country ballad.”

Cash lit a stim cig and grinned. “Kale: ‘I just think it’s funny how—’”

“I hate all of you,” I muttered.

Ricardo pointed at me like I was a PowerPoint slide. “YOU. Let’s talk about YOU.”

“Oh god.”

“You disappeared, mid-job. Again. For dick.”

“I did not—”

“FOR THE SAME COPY-PASTE GLITCH-BOY!”

Michael finally chimed in. “Do you just get a brain update every time he finishes?”

“OH MY GOD,” I said, face in hands.

Trent clapped. “Kar’s mental core: now 30% more corrupted per session!”

“I swear to God—”

Cash tossed me a microfiber cloth. “Here, go wipe down your moral compass. It’s covered in bad decisions.”

“I thought I could get answers.”

Ricardo leaned back dramatically. “Your cooch is gonna be the reason the city falls.”

I cracked.

Laughed.

Big, ugly, can’t-breathe laugh.

They all followed.

Every Looney in the room.

Even Michael cracked a real smile.

Nobody said it.

But the air got lighter.

Even as Kale’s absence hung like static in the corners.

Wrestlehell XXXV

“This is WrestleHell, baby!” Trent yelled, standing on the kitchen counter, shirtless, covered in nacho cheese and holding a steel folding chair like a holy relic. “Blood, backflips, and betrayal!”

“You’re not even in the event, dumbass,” Cash said, shoving him off with one hand and adjusting the projector. “You’re on beer patrol.”

“I’m also talent!” Trent shouted from the floor. “I built a ring in the backyard!”

“That’s not a ring,” Michael said, walking in with a cooler under each arm. “It’s four beanbags, a kiddie pool, and a broomstick.”

Trent pointed dramatically. “It’s performance art.”

I sat on the arm of the busted couch, watching the madness unfold like someone observing a wildlife documentary narrated by a stroke victim.

Ricardo was in the kitchen mixing “margaritas,” which looked suspiciously like vodka, pickle brine, and Mountain Dew.

“Karyna,” he said, handing me a solo cup that smelled like sin, “your taste buds won’t survive, but your spirit might ascend.”

“Thanks, I think.”

I took a sip.

Regretted it instantly.

“Why is it spicy,” I coughed.

“I added jalapeño Jell-O shots. For texture.”

Cash turned up the projector. The WrestleHell XXXV opening theme blasted through the war room like a freight train huffing Monster Energy.

Everyone screamed.

Except Kale.

He sat on the garage step, fiddling with a broken chair leg, staring into the middle distance like a jilted vampire.

I couldn’t stop noticing.

I needed air.

So I slipped outside through the kitchen door, down the cracked steps, into the alley behind the House.

That’s when I saw him.

Leaning against the wall like he was waiting for the world to ask the wrong question.

Xero.

Same chain. Same tattoos. Same annoying, unreadable smirk.

“You stalking me?” I said, arms crossed.

He didn’t blink. “You’re loud.”

“You’re creepy.”

“Yet here I am. And here you are.”

I stared at him.

The smart thing would be to walk away.

So obviously—

“Come inside.”

He blinked. “You’re inviting me in?”

“I’m drunk, stupid, and about to watch a grown man get suplexed into a kiddie pool full of jello.”

“...Tempting.”

“You’ll fit right in.”

He followed me in.

God help us all.

By the time I walked back into the yard with Xero in tow, Ricardo was already limping around in glittery underwear, holding a rubber snake and yelling about betrayal.

Cash was shirtless, slathered in beer foam, filming everything for a future “documentary” titled “The Mat Was Never Real.”

Trent spotted Xero first.

Paused mid-narration.

Lowered his mic (which was actually just a battered flashlight).

“We got a late entrant!” he bellowed. “Ladies, gents, and nonbinary champions of the death pit—welcome... THE DARK INK DEVOURER.”

Xero blinked.

“...Excuse me?”

Ricardo staggered over. “New guy looks like he DJs dubstep at a cemetery.”

Cash peeked over a beer can. “Or like someone who asks for a separate spoon for his feelings.”

Michael muttered, “How come every guy Kar brings home looks like they’ve been photoshopped by depression.”

“I’m standing right here,” I said.

“We know,” they all replied in unison.

Kale hadn’t noticed yet.

Too busy powerbombing Ricardo into a lawn chair and yelling “THIS IS FOR BEING BORN.”

Xero stood stiff as the crowd closed around him, unsure if he'd been invited or about to be sacrificed.

Trent was already halfway through his fake intro: "This man's tattoos can see into your future! He once made a barista cry just by existing! And he's never paid rent on time!"

"Facts," I whispered, sipping Ricardo's jalapeño margarita sludge.

Michael elbowed Cash. "You see the way he's looking at her?"

"Like he either wants to kiss her or extract classified data through her mouth," Cash replied.

"That's a mood."

Then—

Kale turned.

He saw Xero.

His grip tightened on the folding chair.

You could hear the tension.

The whole yard got quiet.

I sighed. "Don't."

Kale dropped the chair.

Turned.

Walked back inside.

Didn't say a word.

Xero raised an eyebrow. "That one's fun."

"You have no idea."

Someone in the yard screamed, "I'M BLEEDING SPARKLES," and another responded with, "BLEED FOR THE BRAND, BABY."

I tried to care.

I tried to laugh when Cash set off the confetti cannon and blew glitter into Michael's open beer. I tried to cheer when Trent hit a trampoline backflip and nearly impaled himself on a broom handle. I even tried to smile when Ricardo challenged a raccoon to a thumb war.

But it all felt... far away.

Because he was standing by the edge of the yard, next to the hydrangeas no one ever watered, arms crossed, just watching me.

Not the match.

Not the explosions of noise and movement and idiot testosterone.

Just me.

Xero hadn't said much since I let him in.

He hadn't drunk anything.

Hadn't sat down.

He looked like the only sober thought in a room full of drunk hallucinations.

I walked over.

Because of course I did.

"Having fun?" I asked, sipping from a can labeled 'WRESTLE-FUEL: DEATHBERRY.'

"I'm impressed none of you are dead yet," he said.

"That's our brand."

He looked at me, and it wasn't hungry or flirty or calculating.

It was familiar.

Like he knew something I didn't.

"Why do you keep showing up?" I asked.

His voice was soft. "I miss you."

I froze.

"...We don't know each other."

He tilted his head. "Don't we?"

My chest felt like it was filling with static.

Something about the way he said it—so sure, so gentle—hurt.

"Don't do that," I said. "Don't play the 'maybe you forgot me' card."

He didn't smile this time.

Just looked sad. Like I'd guessed the twist in a magic trick too early.

Then he said:

“You used to hum when you were scared. Not a song. Just a noise. You thought no one noticed.”

My heart punched the inside of my ribs.

“Go fuck yourself,” I whispered.

He nodded. “Fair.”

I walked away before I could cry.

The crowd cheered as Kale dragged Ricardo across the grass in a figure-four leglock while screaming something about “betrayal by system-integrated seduction bots.”

But I didn’t look back.

The kitchen reeked of burnt nacho cheese and whatever radioactive rot Trent called “ketchup fusion.”

I opened the fridge.

Stared into the void of expired dairy and a single can labeled “MAYBE TUNA.”

“Planning to live in there?” Kale’s voice hit from behind.

I didn’t flinch.

Didn’t turn.

“Just hiding from your emo replacement,” he added.

Still didn’t turn.

“Pretty sure he’s outside getting emotional over a moth.”

“You done?” I asked, reaching for the least offensive drink—an unlabeled clear bottle that might’ve been vodka or windshield wiper fluid.

“Depends. You done banging unlicensed walking malware?”

That made me turn.

“Kale—”

“No, it’s fine,” he said, waving it off with that signature Kale Brand Casual Rage™. “Totally cool you brought him here. Our inner sanctum. Our House of Hoodlums. Hope he enjoyed the body slams and emotional dysfunction.”

“He didn’t do anything—”

“That’s the problem!” Kale snapped. “He doesn’t do anything. He just exists. And you fall apart like a wet napkin at a BBQ.”

“Oh my god,” I muttered. “You’re jealous.”

He stared at me like I just slapped him with a fish.

“I’m—what?”

“You’re jealous. Of a guy with face tattoos and no rent history.”

“I am not jealous of—”

“Okay then why do you go full soap opera mode every time I look at him?”

“Because!” he shouted. “Because you look at him like he’s safe. And that—”

His voice broke.

“That pisses me off.”

We stood there, breathing, not breathing, microwave humming like a heart monitor.

“Maybe he is,” I said, quieter. “Maybe he’s the only person who doesn’t expect me to be something I’m not.”

Kale’s face didn’t move, but his fists curled tight.

Then—

He shook his head. Stepped back.

“Enjoy the possible tuna,” he muttered, and walked out.

I stared at the bottle in my hand.

Didn’t drink it.

Didn’t move.

Didn’t breathe.

The projector whined as the last match lit up the wall.

“Cage Match of the Century!” the announcer howled through feedback. “One night only—one way out!”

Everyone was either unconscious or arguing with a raccoon.

Trent was face-down in the nacho pool.

Michael had fallen asleep using Cash as a pillow.

Kale hadn't come back.

Xero had disappeared into the night like a dream I wasn't sure I'd made up.

I was draped across the couch like laundry someone gave up on, my eyes half-open, brain drifting sideways, mouth tasting like regret and fire sauce.

The crowd on-screen roared as the final pin hit.

The commentator screamed—

“I'll see you in the echo, sweetheart!”

And everything stopped.

Because I'd heard that before.

Not in this room.

Not tonight.

Him.

Xero.

He said that. To me. When?

The shard pulsed.

Like a muscle twitch behind my eye. Like something that wasn't asleep anymore.

For one second, I saw a hallway. Chrome. Too clean. Too white.

I saw myself—smaller. Hospital gown. Barefoot. Crying.

And a voice—his voice.

“I'll see you in the echo, sweetheart.”

Then nothing.

Gone.

The screen went black.

And I was just a girl on a couch again.

Breathing like I'd run a marathon in my sleep.

And wondering, not for the first time—

What the hell did they do to me?

No Place Like Home

I woke up to the sound of sizzling.

Not the sexy kind.

The suspicious meat at 1 a.m. kind.

Cash was in the kitchen, shirtless, in basketball shorts and a respirator, poking at a pan full of something grayish-brown that hissed like it wanted to sue.

“Why is it... foaming?” I croaked from the couch.

He turned around slowly, spatula in hand like a priest holding up a cursed wafer. “Don’t worry, I found it in a sealed bag. No air means no bacteria.”

“What bag.”

“No label.”

“...Cash.”

“It was vacuum-sealed in the freezer behind the armory. Next to the dynamite.”

I sat up. “That’s not meat, that’s a war crime.”

He shrugged. “Smells like steak to me.”

“It smells like Trent’s sock drawer if it had PTSD.”

Across the room, Michael snored in a tangle of couch cushions and someone else’s hoodie. Trent was curled up in the laundry basket muttering, “My finishing move is state-sanctioned.” Ricardo had fallen asleep inside the kiddie pool—now empty except for his legs and one goldfish cracker stuck to his thigh.

Kale walked through the living room without looking at me.

Still hadn’t spoken to me since The Incident.

Still wore that same expression—somewhere between “I’m fine” and “I’m going to fistfight the moon.”

He disappeared into the garage.

Cash turned back to the stove.

Then paused.

Frowned.

“I didn’t turn off the server ping.”

I rubbed my eyes. “What?”

He stepped over a sleeping Trent, opened the server room door.

Red lights.

The kind of red that doesn’t blink.

It pulses.

“...That’s not good,” he muttered.

I was on my feet in seconds.

Cash pressed his fingers to the server core, tapped a screen. “Local net’s being jammed. That’s military-grade. Only thing nearby that could do that is—”

Outside—

Three short beeps.

One long.

Then a crackle of static.

Then—silence.

And then—

The house shook.

A wall imploded in the garage.

Smoke. Screams. Lights.

And the roar of engines.

They were here.

The Voodooos.

The garage door didn't open.

It detonated.

The wall behind it collapsed inward like someone punched through reality with a truck full of knives and bad karma.

Metal screamed.

Wood snapped.

Kale's station—his car, his posters, his vinyl collection—was instantly buried.

He screamed something unintelligible and launched himself at the dust cloud with a baseball bat and no shirt.

Ricardo shot up from the kiddie pool like a drugged meerkat.

"WHAT YEAR IS IT?!"

Michael yanked Trent out of the laundry basket by the hoodie.

"WAKE UP—GRAB A CHAIR—SHIT'S BAD."

Outside, floodlights hit the yard.

The wrong kind.

Blue-red. Stuttering.

Haitian trap music blared over speakers mounted to the front of a matte-black Voodoo assault truck, now parked where the garage used to be.

Then came the yelling.

French-Creole slang, fast and angry.

And then came the machetes.

They poured in.

Over the ruined wall. Through the back gate. Through the fucking windows.

Dozens of them—painted skin, glowing cyber-eyes, blood charms jangling.

One screamed, "CUT THEIR TONGUES OUT—WE DON'T NEED TO HEAR 'EM!"

Michael kicked over the coffee table and took cover.

Trent tripped over a bucket of ice and used it as a shield.

Karyna grabbed the closest thing: a crowbar under the couch.

Ricardo launched himself at a Voodoo wielding a flaming bat while screaming “FOR THE BRAND!”

And Kale?

Kale dove through a second-story window like a rabid possum and landed on the truck hood, roaring something primal and swinging his bat like it owed him child support.

The Goonz were under attack.

And the House was bleeding.

The House of Hoodlums was screaming.

Floorboards snapped like ribs under boots. Doors splintered. Walls caught fire. The air reeked of sweat, gasoline, and teeth.

Michael threw a chair into someone’s face and took a machete to the thigh.

Cash threw a toaster like a grenade and screamed, “WHO NEEDS BULLETS WHEN YOU GOT KITCHENWARE?!”

Ricardo was dragging Trent behind a flipped recliner, both of them bleeding, laughing, and still throwing bottles at anything that moved.

Kale was gone.

Or everywhere.

Every time a Voodoo swung, Kale hit harder.

Face bloodied.

Eyes wild.

Screaming in English, Russian, and something that might’ve been Klingon.

I made it to the hallway—just past the war room.

Smoke everywhere.

I tripped on a severed drone leg.

Got back up.

Saw the server rack—

Cracked open.

Glowing.

And heard the tick.
Not a bomb tick.
Something wetter.
Organic.
Like a heartbeat right before the aneurysm.
Then the blast.
A flash of pink and silver.
Something burst from the server.
Spinning.
Burning.
And coming straight at me.
I didn't move.
Didn't scream.
I just watched it slide into me like it belonged.
Right into my gut.
There was no pain.
Just...
Light.
And then—
Darkness.
I opened my eyes.
Smoke above me.
Red light.
Sirens? No—voices.
Screaming.
I looked down at my stomach.

There should've been a hole.

There should've been blood.

There was nothing.

Not even a scar.

Just a faint, pink glow fading beneath my skin like the last breath of a dying star.

I sat up.

No pain.

No shaking.

Just—clarity.

Too much of it.

I could hear everything.

Kale's bat splintering.

Cash yelling "LEFT—NO, YOUR OTHER LEFT!"

Ricardo sobbing and laughing at once.

And then—

Time slipped.

I saw it.

Not happening.

Not yet.

But about to.

Kale.

Back turned.

A Voodoo behind him, machete raised.

No one else saw it.

No one else could.

I moved.

No thinking.

No plan.

I was there.

The crowbar in my hand struck first—clean, flat, and loud.

The Voodoo dropped like a puppet with its strings cut.

Kale spun around.

Eyes wide.

I didn't speak.

Didn't need to.

Because when I looked at him, I could see the sentence forming in his mouth a half-second before it arrived.

"You just—"

"I know," I said.

He stopped.

Stared.

And in the flicker of light from the burning server rack behind me, I saw myself reflected in his eyes.

Eyes glowing faint pink.

And behind them?

Something that was watching back.

The last Voodoo fell around 3:17 a.m.

Half-limping. Half-on fire.

He tried to throw a grenade and slipped in nacho grease.

Ricardo threw a dismembered drone at him.

And just like that—

They were gone.

The House was ruined.

Garage: gone.

Kitchen: half on fire.

Living room: three inches deep in blood, soda, and glitter.

War room: gutted.

But the Goonz were still standing.

Trent was wrapped in a torn shower curtain and muttering about insurance.

Michael had stitches made out of headphone wires.

Cash was barefoot, holding a shotgun in one hand and a half-melted grilled cheese in the other.

Ricardo was alive but twitching like a cursed animatronic.

Kale stood next to me.

He didn't ask how I saved him.

He didn't ask why my hands were shaking even though I wasn't cold.

He just looked at me like I was a question with no safe answer.

I looked down at my shirt.

Burned through.

Beneath it, faint pink veins still glowed across my stomach.

Fading.

Not enough.

Inside, it felt like my blood was plugged into something.

My thoughts weren't linear.

I could still see half a second ahead.

Every word someone said—I heard it twice.

Once from their mouth.

Once before they opened it.

And then—

Michael spoke.

“You good?”

I opened my mouth.

Said: “Yeah, I’m—”

And I heard it.

Not my voice.

Not alone.

Another tone layered under it.

Faint.

Echoed.

Too smooth.

Too old.

Like someone else was speaking through me.

I shut up.

Kale noticed.

Of course he did.

But he didn’t say anything.

And neither did I.

Because I didn’t want to know what would come out next.

Crimson Caches

The door slammed open at 2:41 a.m.

“I bring gifts and injuries!” Michael bellowed, one eye already swelling shut.

Trent stumbled in behind him, shirt torn, carrying a shotgun and someone’s prosthetic leg.

“I think this is decorative,” he said, spinning it like a baton. “It’s got bedazzling.”

I looked up from the couch, blanket draped around my shoulders like a cloak of disappointment. “Did you two get into another fight with the Voodoos?”

Michael dropped onto the arm of the couch, bleeding from the ear. “Nope. This time it was everybody.”

Cash leaned in from the kitchen, where he was boiling something red and suspicious in a coffee pot. “Define ‘everybody.’”

Michael grinned. “Northline Choir’s out for blood. Café Hex is torching every safehouse south of I-44. There was a literal swordfight outside the Rite Aid.”

“Wait.” Ricardo poked his head in from the war room. “Like, katanas?”

“Broadswords. And one guy with a harpoon.”

Cash: “You sure you weren’t just hallucinating again?”

Trent flopped into the busted recliner and held up a laminated map, sticky with beer and blood. “This fell out of some Choir guy’s jacket before I knocked his teeth into a gumball machine.”

It showed transport routes, emergency vaults, and cache markers.

Cash took one look and whistled. “That’s their real map. Not decoy routes.”

Michael: “We’re talking unguarded backups. Drug houses mid-move. Credit caches getting relocated. It’s Christmas out there.”

Ricardo: “You want to rob them.”

Michael: “We have to rob them.”

Cash pulled out a dry-erase marker. “Call it... redistribution of illicit wealth.”

Me: “You just want to steal enough creds to build another stupid hot tub in the garage.”

“Wrong,” Cash said. “Two hot tubs. One for humans. One for illicit meat.”

Everyone stared at him.

Kale, sitting silently in the corner, spit a tooth into a mug.

Xero stood near the window, arms crossed, unreadable as ever.

My eyes flicked toward him.

He didn’t say a word.

Just nodded—once—like he’d been waiting for this play all along.

Trent cracked his knuckles. “So what’s the plan, boss?”

Michael looked at all of them—bruised, limping, bloodstained, and smiling.

“Same as always,” he said. “We hit them where it hurts.

Their wallets.

Their stashes.

And their damn pride.”

The House of Hoodlums roared.

The war room was still partially melted, but that never stopped anyone.

Cash had duct-taped a projector to a standing fan. The map glowed against a buckled wall, half ash, half bullet holes.

“Three targets,” Cash said, uncapping a marker with his teeth. “All vulnerable. All full of stuff we like. Credits, drugs, and egos.”

He drew three angry red circles on the map like a football coach on shrooms.

“First: Northline Choir’s credit cache. Hidden in an old dentist’s office near Broken Arrow. Disguised as a loyalty card server farm. No guards, just encryption and dental chairs.”

“Second: Voodoo transfer site. They’re smuggling bio-narcs through a converted food truck down on 66. Fast, armored, very burnable.”

“Third: Café Hex stash house. Vault hidden under a fake yoga studio. Full of crypto, street chems, and disappointment.”

Michael raised a hand. “Which one has the most drugs?”

Cash pointed at the food truck.

“Dibs.”

Kale leaned against the wall, arms crossed, chewing on a toothpick like it owed him rent. He hadn’t said a word to me since the night of the raid.

Ricardo raised his hand. “Can I do the dentist one? I have unresolved trauma.”

“You mean that time you swallowed a filling?”

“It stayed in me for months.”

Trent walked in, shirtless, carrying a bottle of sriracha and a pocket knife. “I vote we hit the food truck with the dentist chair.”

Everyone ignored him.

I sat on the edge of the server rack, watching the projection flicker across the wall. My fingers wouldn't stop tapping on my knee.

And I wasn't the only one twitching.

Xero stood near the corner, checking the sight alignment on a stolen sidearm, silent as a confession booth.

No flair. No swagger.

Just focus.

Cash noticed.

"So... emo backup dancer wants in?"

Xero didn't even look up. "Tell me where. I'll go."

That shut everyone up for a second.

Even Kale.

Especially Kale.

"You got a death wish or just like riding our clout?" Kale asked, real quiet.

Xero didn't bite.

Didn't blink.

Just said, "Better than standing still."

I didn't say anything either.

But I caught the look Kale threw me.

That one that said I see you.

And I know what this is.

Even if you don't.

Cash clapped his hands.

"Alright, nerds. Saddle up.

We're gonna rob three gangs before breakfast."

We were ten steps past the fake reception desk when I smelled the ambush.

Not just blood.

Gun oil. Sugar. Cigars.

Voodoos.

“Michael—” I started.

Too late.

The ceiling tiles exploded.

Gunfire rained down like judgment.

Michael screamed, “COVER!” and tackled me behind the waiting room chairs.

Xero didn’t even flinch.

He was already firing.

Two shots—clean. Controlled.

One Voodoo dropped from the ceiling, hit the floor with a wet crunch.

Another popped up behind a wall partition.

Michael shot him through it.

The fake dentist posters curled in the heat.

“SMILE WITH CONFIDENCE.”

My ears were ringing.

I crawled to a side wall and peered around the corner—more coming from the hallway. Five.
No, six.

I raised the SMG Cash gave me.

Pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

“FUCK—SAFETY—”

Michael’s shotgun barked three times. Three bodies hit the floor.

Xero slid beside me, handed me a second clip, didn’t say anything.

He didn’t need to.

The hallway was chaos.

And in the middle of it?
Me.
Heart thudding.
Teeth bared.
Vision skipping frames.
I saw them move before they moved.
One lunged. I turned. Fired.
Two shots in the leg, one in the throat.
He fell still twitching, gasping something in Creole that sounded like “ghost girl.”
I didn’t hear it.
Or maybe I just didn’t care.
Because it felt good.
Every shot. Every scream. Every time one of them fell and I didn’t.
The shard pulsed under my skin like a drumbeat.
Michael reloaded with his teeth.
Xero disarmed a guy with one hand and broke his neck with the other.
And I?
I laughed.
Not loud.
Just once.
But it was real.
And when the last Voodoo ran?
I didn’t chase him.
But I wanted to.
“That was too many for coincidence,” Michael panted, wiping blood off his jaw.
“Someone sold us out.”

Xero nodded, kicking open the back office door.

Inside: stacks of cred chips, a severed hand still gripping a ledger, and one half-crushed hard drive.

I stared at my reflection in a cracked dental mirror.

Blood on my face.

Eyes too bright.

Something smiling inside me.

Something new.

Kale's knuckles were white on the wheel.

"Food truck's six blocks ahead," he muttered, teeth tight.

Ricardo was sprawled across the passenger seat, laughing at nothing.

"Dude," he said, "I think I just saw a pigeon give me a thumbs-up."

Kale didn't answer.

He just hit the gas harder.

The target was a matte-black taco truck—modded out, low suspension, reinforced glass. Voodoos had it riding south on 66 like they were selling churros and ketamine door-to-door.

The plan was simple:

Wait for the turn.

Box them in.

Disable the engine.

Steal the product.

Leave no survivors.

Ricardo lit a cigarette with a match he struck off his own palm.

"So like... Karyna and Xero are a thing now, or—"

"Shut. The fuck. Up."

The truck turned.

"Go-time," Kale growled.

They cut through a side alley, gunned the engine, slammed in behind the truck.

Kale shouted, “NOW!” and Ricardo leaned out the window with a pipe bomb in a burrito wrapper.

But before he could throw—

The back of the food truck opened.

And bullets poured out.

“AMBUSH—AMBUSH—AMBUSH!” Ricardo screamed, pulling back in with four new holes in his shirt and none in his skin. Somehow.

Kale swerved, jumped the curb, and rammed a fruit stand.

Mangos exploded.

A Voodoo clung to the back of the truck, screaming in Creole and firing two pistols in opposite directions.

Kale yanked the e-brake.

“WE’RE DOING THIS LIVE.”

He kicked open his door while still rolling and dove toward the truck, pipe wrench in one hand, bad attitude in the other.

Ricardo jumped out too. Wrong direction. Landed in a kiddie pool full of rainwater and used condoms.

“COVER ME!” Kale shouted.

Ricardo pulled a flare gun from his sock.

“YOU GOT IT, SWEET PRINCE!”

The firefight was ugly.

Point-blank.

Loud.

Uncoordinated.

Ricardo shot a Voodoo in the crotch with a flare while crying.

Kale punched a man so hard he hit the truck, bounced off, and cracked the windshield.

Then, he climbed inside.

Shot the driver in the throat.

Kicked the passenger out the door onto a moving bicycle.

Ricardo threw up and screamed, "I GOT THE DRUGS!"

Kale floored it.

Blood on the wheel.

Glass in his mouth.

He drove like a demon all the way back to the House.

Didn't say a word.

I knew he thought about me.

And how I didn't even tell him Xero was coming along.

We didn't celebrate.

We collapsed.

Ricardo passed out in the middle of the floor surrounded by neon vials, chicken nuggets, and what he claimed was a championship belt from "some sport, maybe imaginary."

Michael was soaking his leg in an old cereal bowl filled with whiskey.

Trent had made a throne out of the loot bags and declared himself "King of Crime and Fungal Infection."

Cash played victory music from a cracked tablet: heavy synth, off-key opera, someone screaming in Russian.

I sat in the doorway.

The shard inside me was buzzing.

Not pain.

Not heat.

Just a steady, electric hum.

Like a drum I couldn't stop tapping to.

I hadn't slept.

Didn't want to.

My vision kept flickering—Xero's hands, Xero's voice, Xero's blood on someone else's boots.

I didn't know if it was memory or just bleed.

Kale hadn't looked at me all night.

He came in, threw down a crate of stolen drugs, and went straight to the far corner of the living room. Shirt off. Eyes closed. Pulse ticking in his jaw.

When I finally moved, it wasn't toward him.

It was the garage.

I needed to breathe.

Instead, I found Xero.

Back turned.

Shirt tossed onto a workbench.

He was bent over a crate, arms flexed, silent.

Cleaning a rifle that looked too old to still work.

I opened my mouth to say something—

And that's when I saw it.

The glow.

Soft.

Faint.

Just under the skin, at the top of his spine.

Pink.

Exactly the same pink.

Exactly like mine.

I froze.

He didn't notice.

Didn't turn.

Just said—quietly—

“I've had it since I woke up on a table in 2051.”

“Did they put it in you?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I stepped closer.

The light pulsed once. Faint. Like it sensed me.

“Do you know what it is?” I asked.

He hesitated.

Then:

“No”

But I know it hums louder when you’re near.”

I didn’t ask anything else.

I just stood there.

And tried to remember how to breathe.

Buy Low, Betray High

The diner was called Myrtle’s, and it hadn’t seen health code compliance since President Grimes got dismembered on live TV.

Michael sat in a booth with a plastic menu that stuck to his forearms like static and shame.

Across from him: Twig.

Ex-runner, full-time information leech. Always smelled like peach vape and dog shampoo.

“Look,” Twig whispered, “the New Jacks ain’t just throwing offers around. They specifically want your crew.”

Michael sipped his coffee. Regretted it immediately. “Why us?”

Twig picked at a scab on his neck. “Y’all humiliated the Voodoos. Twice. You’re hot right now. And the Jacks? They’re all about optics.”

Michael leaned back, brow raised. “We’re not a brand, bro.”

Twig snorted. "Tell that to their data analyst-slash-poet who sends them aesthetic moodboards for every mission."

He slid a flash chip across the table. "Coordinates, handshake price, payment type. They want the whole stash. All of it. That's a seven-digit transaction, my guy."

Michael stared at the chip.

Then at Twig.

"Do they know it's Voodoo stock?"

Twig nodded. "They prefer it. Voodoo gear tests high for purity and trip duration. The New Jacks want brand loyalty."

Michael picked up the chip.

"Who else knows about this?"

Twig hesitated.

That meant someone.

Michael stood. Tossed a few credbits on the table.

"If this goes sideways, I'm mailing you back your own teeth."

Twig blinked.

"Y-you said that last time."

Michael grinned. "And you still have them. Which means I'm consistent."

He walked out into the morning glare, dialed me, and said:

"We got buyers.

They got cash.

We got drugs.

Let's dance."

The garage smelled like plastic wrap, gasoline, and regret.

"Don't snort anything until we label it," Cash yelled, slapping Ricardo's hand away from a vacuum-sealed brick of pink powder.

"I was just sniffing!"

"That's worse."

The drug pile was ugly.

Half Voodoo synth-narcs. Half unknown bio-reactives. Everything sealed, encrypted, or humming with mild radiation.

They spread out tarps on the floor.

I sat cross-legged beside a crate of vials, sorting by color and smell. Every time my fingers brushed one too long, my pulse jumped. The shard pulsed in rhythm.

Xero sat across from me.

No words.

Just work. Efficient. Methodical.

His movements mirrored mine.

It made my jaw tighten.

It made my heart kick.

Michael paced with a clipboard, shouting half-formed commands like a cracked-out supply sergeant.

“Separate the blues, weigh the silver! No, Ricardo, do not taste-test the glowing ones!”

Trent was counting something out loud.

“What are you even measuring?” I asked.

“Vibes.”

Cash laughed.

Kale didn’t.

He stood off to the side, arms crossed, watching Xero. Not blinking. Not fidgeting. Just watching.

Every time Xero reached into a crate, Kale’s knuckles twitched like he wanted to throw a wrench.

“Y’know,” Cash muttered to me, “for a spooky bastard, he’s kinda handy. Like, if this was a sitcom, he’d be the weird but useful neighbor.”

“He’s not a neighbor,” I said.

“Roommate, then?”

Kale dropped a crowbar on the floor way louder than necessary.

Everyone jumped.

“I’m gonna go check the—stuff.” he muttered.

“What stuff?” Michael asked.

“THE STUFF.”

He stormed out of the garage.

Ricardo leaned over to me and stage-whispered:

“Daaaamn. Jealous bald man alert. Better watch out, Xero. You got that main character jawline and zero social interest. That’s Kale’s whole thing.”

Xero didn’t look up.

Didn’t laugh.

Just said,

“He’s not jealous of me. He’s jealous of what she gave me without realizing it.”

I blinked. “What’d I give you?”

Xero paused.

Then:

“Your heart.”

No one said anything after that.

But I didn’t look away from him for a long time.

The elevator to the rooftop club was too clean.

Cash wiped his hands on his hoodie like grime might be illegal here.

“Feels like someone’s gonna sell me vitamins and a subscription box.”

Michael checked his knife. “Feels like someone’s gonna try.”

The doors opened with a swoosh, revealing the most corporate-fever-dream-ass rooftop any of them had ever seen.

Neon vines.

Waterless fountains.

Chairs that looked like tongues.

And the New Jacks?

Standing in a loose semicircle, all glow tattoos, synthetic fabrics, chrome fingernails, and sarcasm. Each one styled like they'd walked out of a marketing campaign for a drug they couldn't pronounce.

Their leader:

Ether.

Slick. Pretty. Wearing a clear trench coat over a suit made of what looked like vinyl money.

"Looney Goonz," Ether said, sipping something blue from a conical glass. "Big fans of your... chaos branding."

Michael: "We're not a brand."

Ether: "Everyone's a brand, darling. Some just underachieve."

Ricardo accidentally knocked over a planter. "I'm sorry. This ficus called me a slur."

Ether smiled wide. "Let's talk numbers."

They did.

Six figures.

Then seven.

Cryptocreds in untraceable chains.

The Jacks would resell the product on party nets and boutique chem markets. The Goonz got paid, no strings.

Too smooth.

Too easy.

Then Ether dropped it.

"Just full transparency—we're not the only ones interested. Someone else put in a shadow bid. Much higher."

My fingers twitched.

Michael: "Who?"

Ether shrugged. "Didn't say. Just left coordinates and an encrypted voice file."

He held up a tablet. Pressed play.

A distorted voice buzzed through:

"Tell the clowns they don't own what they stole."

Tell them I want it back.

"All of it."

Everyone went quiet.

Cash blinked. "That's not Voodoo. That's Hex. Café Hex doesn't talk like that unless they've got corp iron behind them."

Kale hissed through his teeth.

Ether smiled like a shark in influencer sunglasses.

"So, lovely Goonz. Still want to sell?

Or do you wanna be legends?"

Michael looked at his crew.

Xero, quiet in the back, met my gaze.

His lips moved just slightly:

"Don't trust that smile."

"Okay," Cash said, pacing in front of the busted flatscreen like a substitute teacher on probation. "We got the Jacks offering real creds. But Hex knows we've got the product, and that shouldn't be possible."

"I say we kill the deal," Kale growled. "Too hot. Too fast. We dump the stash in the river and ghost."

Trent raised a hand. "Can I keep one? For like... emotional support purposes?"

"No," Michael said. "And also absolutely not."

I leaned back on the arm of the couch, chewing my thumbnail. My head was buzzing again, but not from the shard. Just the pressure. Eyes on me. Gangs sniffing around like hyenas. Too many people playing smart.

Not enough playing mean.

Then:

“Sell it twice.”

Everyone turned.

Xero was sitting on the floor, calmly cleaning blood off the blade of a multitool.

Kale’s voice was immediate. “Shut the fuck up.”

Xero didn’t.

“We divide the product. Sell half to the Jacks. Package the rest as a second shipment and offer it to Hex directly. Staggered delivery, opposite ends of the city.”

Ricardo blinked. “So like... a double cross with style?”

“Not even a cross,” Xero said. “They’ll both think they’re the only ones buying. We get paid twice. Then we vanish.”

Cash whistled. “That is so us.”

Kale stood up. “That’s so stupid. Hex will find out. They always find out.”

Xero didn’t move.

“Let them. By the time they do, we’ll have credits, wheels, and masks on new IDs. All we need is timing.”

Michael: “And a fall guy.”

Everyone looked at Trent.

Trent raised his hands. “What? No! Last time I was the fall guy, I got tased in the asshole!”

Cash turned to me.

“What do you think? We con both sides and bounce? Or play it safe?”

I looked at Xero.

Still calm.

Still watching me.

That same low glow hiding just beneath his skin.

My shard buzzed like it was smiling.

“Fuck it,” I said. “Let’s burn both ends of the fuse and see who screams first.”

It was a weird kind of quiet.

The kind you only got in the throat of a plan, when the wheels are already turning, and no one knows who's gonna lose a limb yet.

The House of Hoodlums was glowing in its usual half-lit, duct-tape-everything fashion. One of the old VR rigs was propped up on cinder blocks in the living room, sparking slightly.

Trent stood over it, frowning.

"It only runs porn and old skateboarding games," he muttered. "I swear it used to do taxes."

Xero crouched beside him, twisting a burnt-out capacitor with surgeon fingers.

"You wired the output through a feedback loop," Xero said. "It's choking itself on its own signal."

"That's a thing?!"

"Was. Not anymore."

He flicked a switch.

The rig hummed to life with a cheerful startup moan.

Trent looked physically wounded.

Cash wandered in with a protein bar and blinked. "Did the ghost fix the machine?"

Ricardo: "He's not a ghost. He's a glamorous sleep paralysis demon. I vote we keep him."

"Too late," Cash said. "I already added him to the crew chat."

From across the room, Xero's voice:

"Mute it."

Michael tossed a crumpled can at his head. "Too late for that too, big guy."

Even Michael was smiling.

And me?

I stood at the kitchen doorway, one hand gripping the counter like it might float away if I didn't hold on.

I watched Xero laugh at something stupid Trent said.

I watched Ricardo elbow-bump him.

I watched Cash slide him a half-drunk energy drink like it was a sacred offering.

And I thought:

This is how people disappear.

Not all at once.

But piece by piece.

Until you look around and they've always been there.

Then Xero turned—slow, deliberate—and saw me watching.

And smiled.

Not cool.

Not flirty.

Just... real.

Like he remembered me from a hundred lifetimes.

Like I wasn't just a girl with a glow in her stomach.

But the one who got out.

I blinked.

Looked away.

And the shard under my skin pulsed like a secret knocking to be let out.

Double Crossed, Double Fucked

The drug packages sat on the table like trophies.

Clean. Vacuum-wrapped. Labeled in Cash's sharpie chicken-scratch handwriting:

"Narc Box A" and "Narc Box B."

“Alright, babies,” Michael said, slapping the side of Box A like it was a prize hog, “time to split this party.”

Two cars.

Two drop points.

Two versions of the same lie.

Kale zipped up his jacket like he was about to walk into a war. “Hex gets the riverside?”

Cash nodded. “Old viaduct under the 412 loop. Shady, damp, probably smells like regret and piss. Right up your alley.”

Ricardo, already wearing two different shoes and drinking pickle brine from a thermos, raised his hand. “Do I get a gun?”

Cash handed him a flare and a wrench. “Better.”

I leaned against the wall, arms folded, watching my own boots while Michael did his usual ‘captain of this sinking pirate ship’ routine.

“Me, Karyna, and our favorite corpse-boy Xero are taking Box B to the Jacks,” he said. “Rooftop car park off 86th. Neon hell. The one with the graffiti of a duck shooting heroin.”

“Classy,” said Trent.

“Iconic,” said Ricardo.

Xero stood by the loading door, bag over his shoulder, gloves already on. Always ready. Always quiet.

The war room light flickered once.

I felt it—under my ribs. A twitch. A blink. The shard shifting.

Not pain. Just... pressure.

Like it knew.

I didn’t say anything.

Michael clapped his hands. “We’re gonna rob two gangs and walk away rich. No second chances. No delays. No survivors if shit goes sideways. We good?”

Everyone nodded.

Kale gave me a quick glance. It wasn’t anger this time.

It was worry.

Then the teams split.

Two cars.

Two lies.

And a plan no one was gonna forget.

The rooftop was glowing like a nightclub on life support.

Cheap LED strips ran along the concrete barriers, flashing hot pink and teal. The city blinked in the distance like it was trying to pretend it wasn't dying.

I stepped out of the car first, Box B slung over one shoulder, eyes tracking the roof perimeter.

Michael walked beside me, already chewing a toothpick like it owed him money.

Xero was quiet, scanning every shadow with that unreadable calm. He hadn't said a word since the ride up.

The New Jacks were waiting by the elevator bank.

Too many of them.

Too calm.

Ether stood in the center in a chrome-lined jacket that looked like it had never been touched by poverty or dirt.

"Looney Goonz," he said, spreading his arms. "We brought exactly the kind of briefcases we imagined you'd inspire."

Cash transfer links.

Coded encryption nodes.

Three briefcases for one box of drugs.

"Where's your payment queue?" Michael asked.

Ether smiled.

Didn't answer.

Just turned away and started tapping something into a wrist console.

Behind him, a drone buzzed overhead.

Then a second.

Then—

A third, silent one.

My eye twitched.
And my stomach dropped.
The shard throbbed.
“Something’s wrong,” I whispered.
Michael glanced sideways. “Yeah. They’re stalling.”

Elsewhere—

Under the viaduct, the concrete walls sweated with humidity and paranoia.
Kale stepped out first.
Box A in hand. Jaw clenched.
Café Hex wasn’t even pretending.
There were nine men.
Not five.
Two were holding rifles.
One had a cybernetic hound on a short leash that sniffed the air like it was tasting for blood.
Ricardo muttered, “Shouldn’t we, like... talk terms?”
Cash whispered, “We already did. This is not the plan.”
Kale didn’t say anything.
But his hand tightened on the handle of the box.
His knuckles were white.

Back on the roof, I couldn’t breathe.
I touched my abdomen.
The glow was faint—but hot.
Burning up through my ribs. Into my chest. Into my eyes.
Xero stepped beside me.

Didn't look.

Didn't speak.

But under his shirt, the faint pink glow pulsed through the fabric.

Matching mine.

The drones turned in unison.

Ether smiled like someone waiting for a punchline.

And somewhere far away, I could hear it:

"Welcome back, K7."

The first shot came from under the viaduct.

Cash barely ducked before the bullet popped into the concrete wall behind his head.

"FUCK—DOWN—DOWN—"

Kale flipped the crate up like a shield. Ricardo tripped over his own feet and crawled behind a rusted generator.

Then the soundstorm began—

Full-auto fire.

Yelling in five languages.

And no warning.

—

On the rooftop, the drones started dropping.

Not attacking.

Just falling.

One by one, like grenades with wings.

Michael shouted, "MOVE!" and grabbed me by the shoulder as the first exploded in a flash of white heat.

Xero shoved me to cover behind a concrete column.

"Ether's gone!" he shouted.

And he was.

Just vanished. Not dead. Not shot.
Just gone.
My ears rang.
My hands shook.
And then—something changed.
The light inside me flared.
I stopped breathing for half a second—
And suddenly, everything slowed down.
Not like a hallucination.
Not like Pink.
But real.
The shard pulsed behind my ribs like it was guiding me.
A bullet flew past.
I saw it coming.
Leaned half an inch left.
Felt the air cut around me before it passed.
Michael fired three shots—
I was already moving toward where the last drone would fall.
I wasn't guessing.
I just knew.
Like someone else had already run the sim.
And I was just catching up.
I sprinted into open air.
Slid behind an overturned briefcase.
Drew my sidearm.
Two Jacks behind the elevator.

One on the stairwell.
Drone diving in three—
Two—
I popped up, fired twice—
Perfect hits.
Duck. Roll. Slide.
I shot the drone before it fired.
Michael stopped mid-mag change.
“Karyna?!”
Xero was at my side.
Eyes wide.
I looked at him—and he wasn’t surprised.
Just... quiet.
“Your eyes,” he said.
“They’re glowing.”

Back at the viaduct, Kale stabbed a man through the ribs with a shard of rebar.
Cash screamed, “They knew we were coming!”
Ricardo lit a flare and swung it like a club. “WHO TOLD?! WHO TOLD?!”
Hex men fell.
Blood ran down the ramp into the storm drain.
Kale was hit in the shoulder.
Didn’t notice.
Didn’t stop.
His only thought:
If Karyna dies up there, I’m killing everyone who’s ever said her name.

Meanwhile—

On the roof, my vision blurred.

The last drone dropped.

My gun clicked empty.

Xero caught me before I collapsed.

The world swam.

But even in the dark, I heard it again:

“K7 confirmed.

Cognitive prediction system stabilized.

Subject compatibility: 96%.

Observation: online.”

And then—

black.

I came back online in the backseat of a stolen sedan.

The upholstery smelled like old vape cartridges and fried meat.

Michael was driving like the cops were chasing us, even though they weren’t.

Yet.

Xero was in the back beside me, silent, one hand pressed to my arm like he could hold me in the world.

“—Karyna?” Michael’s voice was distant. “You awake?”

I didn’t answer.

I couldn’t.

I could hear something else.

Not the engine.

Not the gunshots replaying in my head.

But a voice.

Not mine.

Not Xero's.

"Cognitive sync: Phase One complete.

Motor acceleration stabilized.

Subject K7: awake and aware."

I blinked.

The windshield flickered like a HUD.

Predicted trajectories.

Flashpoints.

Threat silhouettes.

Like I was looking through someone else's eyes.

But it was mine.

I grabbed Xero's wrist.

His hand was warm.

His eyes were worried.

"Hey," he said softly. "You're okay."

"No," I whispered. "I'm not."

I sat up.

My hands were shaking.

But not from adrenaline.

From static. Like something was downloading inside me.

"Michael," I said, "We need to pull over."

"Yeah, well, we're not home yet."

"I'm not right."

Xero touched my temple. "What did you see?"

I looked at him.

His shirt was torn.

His skin glowed faintly under the collarbone.

Same pink.

Same shard.

Same system.

“I knew where they were going to shoot before they shot,” I said.

“I saw the elevator guy before he stepped out. I felt the drone timing.”

Michael glanced in the mirror. “Adrenaline. Combat high.”

“No,” Xero said. “That was prediction.”

I touched my abdomen.

The skin was hot.

My vision fuzzed.

And that voice came again—whispering like it lived under my tongue.

“Hello again, Karyna Ilyinichna Vladislav.

Or do you prefer K7?”

I leaned back in the seat, dizzy, sweating.

And for the first time—

I didn’t feel real.

I felt programmed.

The safehouse was an abandoned battery depot behind a noodle bar with four health violations and zero locks.

Cash picked a cot. Ricardo took the floor. Kale sat against a vending machine like he might punch it into working.

Michael patched a graze on his leg with duct tape and poured vodka on the wound like a DIY exorcism.

“I counted at least three different surveillance signals mid-fight,” he muttered. “Neither gang brought those. Someone else was watching.”

“No one’s that smart,” Kale growled.

“Someone was.”

“I said, no one—”

“Stop,” I snapped.

Everyone turned.

I sat at the end of an overturned crate, eyes wild.

Sweating.

Shaking.

Listening.

To something none of them could hear.

“Karyna?” Ricardo whispered. “You okay?”

I didn’t answer.

Because the voice was back.

“Rebuilding surface access.

Authorization code: VLAD-03.

Welcome, K7. You are now awake.”

“Shut up,” I whispered.

Cash blinked. “We didn’t say anything, girl.”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” I hissed, curling in, fists to my temples.

Michael stood. “She’s not detoxing. This is—”

“It’s the shard.” Xero’s voice cut through.

Everyone turned.

He stepped forward, calm but pale.

“She’s syncing.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Kale demanded.

“It means,” Xero said, “that she’s becoming what they made her.”

I looked up.

“Who made me?”

Xero was quiet for a long time.

Then:

“Project Delphi.”

The word dropped like a curse no one had ever said out loud.

Cash stood up. “What the fuck is Delphi?”

Ricardo: “Is that like... a lizard or a government thing?”

Xero turned to Me.

“They put something in us. The shards. The sync. The voice. It’s not done. You felt it activate.”

“I don’t remember anything,” I said.

Xero crouched in front of me.

Soft.

Close.

“You will, I remember some, you will too.”

I stared at him.

And deep in my mind, the voice whispered one last time:

“Asset synced.

Project Delphi reinitialized.

Subject K7: operational.”

You're My Mind

I thought we were going somewhere warm.

That was my first stupid idea.

But no.

Xero brought me to a rotting monorail station that smelled like ozone and dead dreams. The tower part still stood—barely. Vines tried to strangle it from the outside, and inside was all dust and ghost-wires and shit that hummed even though it shouldn't.

"You live here?" I asked, dragging my boot across a cracked floor that once probably told people not to lean on the railings.

He didn't answer.

He just keyed open a reinforced metal door hidden behind a chunk of graffiti that said TOUCH GRASS, DICKHEAD.

Inside?

It was actually kind of beautiful.

Like someone made a bunker out of candlelight and insomnia.

One cot. One radio. A nest of old monitors. A mattress on the floor, and a tarp nailed over a smashed-out window. There were notes—like actual paper notes—taped to the wall with scribbled coordinates, names, and half-erased timelines.

There was a pair of boots beside the door. They were his.

Only his.

This place had never seen another person.

Until me.

"Sit," he said, nodding toward the mattress. "You're close to critical sync. If you don't finish it, it's going to finish you."

I sat.

Even though everything in me screamed RUN.

"You make that sound super comforting," I muttered.

He pulled something from a drawer—a slim chrome data stinger. Looked like a USB stick designed by someone who once dated a taser.

"This will speed up the alignment. Don't worry. It doesn't hurt."

"Do you even know what 'hurt' means?"

He paused.

Then, for the first time in a while, he actually smiled.

Not cool.

Not smug.

Just sad.

“Yeah,” he said. “I know exactly what it means.”

When he pushed the stinger into the shard just below my ribs—

I screamed.

And that’s when everything broke.

I forgot where I was.

I forgot who I was.

My skin wasn’t mine anymore.

My heartbeat had dial-up tone.

My blood went cold, then hot, then bright.

And then the voice came again.

Not through my ears.

Through my teeth.

“K7 neural sync at 82%. Memory partition breach in progress.

Emergency override disabled.

Do not resist.”

Too late for that, honey. I was already resisting with everything I had.

But the memories were still coming.

A river

A white room.

No windows.

Lights too bright.

Monitors with my name not spelled right.

A man in a gray coat saying: “Try again. This one has high emotional elasticity.”

Screams.

Not mine.

A boy’s.

Codename K9.

Someone clawing at a door while I sat strapped to a table and counted the bolts.

Then—

A corridor.

Flooded red.

Alarms howling like feral dogs.

And a voice screaming “run” in a language I forgot I ever knew.

When I woke up, I wasn’t sure I was awake.

I was on the mattress.

Sweating.

Shaking.

And Xero was holding me.

His back was against the wall.

My body was pressed to his chest.

His arms were tight—not romantic, but urgent.

Like he thought I was gonna vaporize if he let go.

“I saw things,” I whispered.

His hand moved slowly across my back. “I know.”

“There was a boy. K0, and another. K9

He went still.

“He screamed,” I said. “I think I knew him. I think he—I think we were part of something.”

“You were.”

I looked up at him.

His eyes were too honest.

He didn’t try to lie to me.

Didn’t give me some comfort sentence.

He just nodded like it hurt him too.

“You okay?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

He nodded again.

That was it.

That was the moment.

Not the shard.

Not the voice.

Not the project.

That.

Someone asking if I was okay, and being totally ready for the answer to be no.

I let my head fall against his shoulder.

And for the first time in... maybe ever—

I let someone hold me without flinching.

I don’t know how long I laid there with him.

Maybe minutes.

Maybe an hour.

Maybe years, because time doesn’t move when someone’s hand is tracing your spine like it’s a question they’re afraid to ask.

Xero hadn’t said anything since I came back.

And neither had I.

Because if I started talking, I knew I’d say too much.

So I did.

“I’m not strong,” I whispered.

His fingertips paused.

“I just pretend good. The pink glow? The shard? That fight? That was luck. It wasn’t me.”

He didn’t answer.

Didn’t try to correct me.

Didn’t offer a speech.

That’s how I knew he believed me.

“I didn’t want any of this,” I said. “The gang, the chaos, the name. K7. I just wanted to be left the fuck alone. I wanted to be some nobody working retail, maybe own a shitty dog, maybe cry on Thursdays and get fat.”

Xero’s voice was quiet. “What stopped you?”

I looked at him.

“You did.”

He blinked.

Not like surprise. More like realization.

Then:

“I’ve been alone since I was thirteen,” he said. “No crew. No safehouse. Just missions and memories that don’t belong to me. You’re the first one that ever looked at me like I was someone. Not something.”

I didn’t say anything.

I leaned in.

He didn’t pull away.

He never pulled away.

When our lips met, it didn’t feel like fire.

It felt like breaking glass.

Like everything holding us apart finally cracked.

His mouth was soft.

His hands were careful.
Like he thought I might vanish.
Like he might vanish.
He kissed like someone who hadn't kissed in years.
Not because he was bad at it.
But because no one had ever let him.
I climbed onto his lap.
His hands on my hips.
I pulled his shirt off—
He let me.
There was a glow on his ribs.
Same as mine.
Same shape.
I touched it.
He exhaled like it hurt in the best way.
“I don't know what this is,” I whispered. “I don't even know who I am.”
His forehead pressed to mine.
“Me neither.”
And that was enough.
That night didn't end in romance.
It ended in quiet.
Two bodies on a mattress.
Breathing together like they'd always been synced.
Not by fate.
By design.

“Y’know,” Ricardo said, upside-down on the couch, “maybe Xero’s not a threat. Maybe he’s just emotionally available.”

Cash didn’t even look up from his portable console. “Nah, too scary. Girls don’t like mysterious androids unless they also cook.”

Michael lit a cigarette with a kitchen match like this was a 1950s Western.

“Kale, you good?”

Kale didn’t answer.

He sat in the corner chair, arms folded, face blank.

The same face he used when losing fights to dish soap bottles.

Ricardo rolled over. “He’s just mad ‘cause Karyna went home with Dracula and not him.”

Cash: “It’s okay, man. You got friendzoned with honor. Like a knight. Or a really sad barista.”

“Didn’t they go to his secret shack?” Trent piped in, picking at a scab. “I bet it’s got mood lighting. Bet it smells like clove cigarettes and trauma.”

Michael blew smoke. “I bet it smells like sex and betrayal.”

“I WILL MURDER EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOU,” Kale snapped, launching a couch pillow across the room. It hit Ricardo in the face with the force of a wet towel slap.

Nobody flinched.

Cash raised both hands. “Whoa, whoa—calm down, bro. You’re not being cucked. You’re being character developed.”

Ricardo: “Let’s be real though—Karyna’s not dating him. She’s studying him. Like ‘ooh what does this do if I lick it’ level of curiosity.”

Kale stood up.

Everyone stared.

He opened his mouth—

And then just left the room.

The silence lasted three seconds.

Then Michael muttered, “Anyway, if he comes back with a machete, I call dibs on being second to die.”

Ricardo raised his bottle.

“To the emo boy with the glow-dick and the soft eyes.”

Everyone clinked.

Even Trent.

Somewhere across the city, I was learning how to live.

And back home?

The Looney Goonz were making sure Kale never knew peace.

I woke up to the sound of rain on rusted steel.

My skin was hot under the blanket.

Xero’s arm was still around me, loose and gentle, like he didn’t know he’d earned the right to stay.

For a minute... I didn’t move.

Because I didn’t want to jinx it.

That quiet.

That stillness.

My hand rested over the spot where the shard lived—

Not glowing.

Not pulsing.

Just there.

“You awake?” Xero’s voice was rough with sleep.

I nodded against his chest. “Unfortunately.”

He kissed my forehead. Slow.

Like someone practicing a language he never learned.

I let myself believe—just for ten seconds—that this was something real.

That the system would stay quiet.

That we'd get a day.

But I was wrong.

"Subject K9: Signal acquired.

Location: Sector Twelve, Grid A-47.

Status: Mobile.

Engagement Level: Unknown."

The voice wasn't loud.

It was inside. Like my own thought, but colder.

I sat up fast.

Xero followed, instantly alert.

"What is it?"

I didn't answer right away.

Because the memory hit me hard—

The boy screaming.

The locked door.

The codename.

"K0." I whispered.

Xero went still.

"I thought I imagined it," I said. "In the sync. I saw him. He was part of it. Like me. But younger. Angrier."

Xero stood.

His back turned to me.

"You didn't imagine it," he said quietly. "There were others. Not all of them made it out. Not all of them should've."

I stared at him.

"What the fuck does that mean?"

He didn't look at me.

He just picked up his shirt.

And on the wall behind him, one of his notes fluttered off the rusted pipe it had been taped to.

It said, in jagged black marker:

K0 = UNKNOWN.

DO NOT APPROACH ALONE.

And the shard whispered again:

“Initiating passive track.

Threat probability: escalating.”

The Dog That Bites Back

The closer we got, the less human the place felt.

Sector Twelve, Grid A-47.

Officially: condemned.

Unofficially: forgotten.

The air tasted like metal and mildew.

Every step sounded wrong.

Like the world didn't want us here.

I followed Xero down a broken freight path. His hand hovered near his sidearm, even though he was trying to look casual.

The shard in me pulsed like it was counting.

One beat.

Then three.

Then none.

“He’s close,” I whispered.

“Too close,” Xero said. “We’re in his zone now.”

The signal pulled us toward a shattered stairwell that dropped into black.

No lights.

No sound.

Not even rats.

Just the smell.

Blood.

Burned plastic.

And something sweet.

Like sugar poured over rot.

Xero went first. I followed.

The stairwell turned into a corridor—low ceiling, walls flayed with graffiti that didn’t even pretend to make sense. Crude drawings of faces with no eyes, dogs with human mouths. A heart pierced by twenty knives. One of them had my name carved underneath:

K7.

I stopped.

Xero saw it too.

“You think he knows we’re here?” I asked.

He didn’t answer.

Because that’s when the music started.

Old. Warped.

Something jazzy.

Something sexually inappropriate.

And it was coming from below.

We followed it.
Down one more set of stairs.
Into hell.
The room was big.
Circular.
Flooded with red neon strips and dozens of busted mannequins.
Some were dressed in hospital gowns.
Some were missing limbs.
Some were taped together.
And in the middle?
He was sitting cross-legged.
Grinning.
Like he'd been waiting years for this moment.
“‘Bout fuckin’ time,” he said.
Zayton Andre.
His voice was smooth and too familiar.
Like someone who once lived in your house without your permission.
He looked straight at me.
“K7.”
He stood.
And smiled.
“Don’t you remember me, baby girl?”
“You got taller,” he said, eyes dragging over me like a strip search.
“Or maybe I got lower.”
Zayton walked slow.
Measured.

Dreadlocks swinging across his shoulders like ropes on a pendulum.

His chest was bare, tattoos crawling down to his knuckles like stories no one finished.

He looked built—like his muscles were forged out of rage and prison pull-ups.

He grinned wide when he saw me staring.

“Aw, baby girl. Don’t look at me like I’m the monster. We came from the same kennel.”

“What are you?” I asked.

He laughed.

That laugh.

It hit the walls like a wet kiss and a slap.

“I’m the truth, K7,” he said. “I’m the one who didn’t lie to himself after they let us go.”

He pointed at Xero.

“You still pretending? Still thinking the world can love something made in a box? Still whisperin’ her name like it won’t burn you in the end?”

Xero didn’t move.

Didn’t speak.

Just stared.

Zayton stepped closer to me.

“You remember the white walls yet?” he asked. “The tether tests? The mirror drills?”

“No,” I said.

He leaned in. Real close.

His breath smelled like peppermint and blood.

“You will.”

I didn’t blink.

“Is this where you kill us?” I asked.

Zayton cocked his head like a confused puppy.

“Kill you?” he said, almost hurt. “Nah. I love you. I love all my siblings. Even the broken ones.”

He stepped back.

Clapped twice.

And that's when the lights changed.

The mannequins lit up.

Dozens of them.

Each one wearing a hospital bracelet.

And each bracelet had a codename.

K0. K3. K5. K6. K7. K9.

Some were crossed out.

Some weren't.

"You see what I built?" he said. "I remember every one of them. I remember Xero screaming for you when they dragged him to the deep cell. I remember him bleeding for you. And you don't even remember."

"I didn't ask for any of this," I said.

He grinned wider.

"No," he said. "But you asked to survive. That's worse."

"You ever wonder why you twitch every time someone touches your ribs?" Zayton said, circling me like a wolf reading poetry.

"I chalked it up to trauma and bad posture," I snapped.

He laughed. "Cute. But nah, it's 'cause that's where they plugged us together. Back in the first round."

"What round?" I said.

"Tether training," Xero answered quietly.

My mouth went dry.

Zayton's eyes lit up.

"Aw shit. He remembers."

He clapped again. A slow, theatrical beat.

"Tell her, X. Tell her what they did with us in the basement. The coils. The black masks. The skinlock exercises."

Xero didn't move.

Didn't speak.

So Zayton turned to me.

"I'll tell you, then," he grinned.

And then he started reciting.

"Day 49.

K7 and K9 assigned proximity loop test.

Physical link enforced.

Emotional sync failed.

Electric pulse override initiated.

Result: K7 screamed until her jaw cracked.

K9 did not let go."

The memory came in frames.

It came all at once.

Me—strapped to a chair.

Wires through my skin.

Zayton in the mirror, howling.

The voice over the intercom saying:

"Hold the tether. Hold the tether. Hold—"

I dropped to my knees.

My hands shook.

The shard flared so hot I choked on my own breath.

"You remember now," Zayton said, kneeling beside me. "You felt what they made us into."

I looked up.

Tears on my face.

Not from pain.

From recognition.

“Why do you want me to see this?” I asked.

He grinned like he was proud.

“Because they lied to you. Told you that you’re the best of us. But you ain’t. You’re just the last one who still thinks she’s human.”

He reached out—

Not to hurt me.

To touch me.

Like we were still wired together.

Like we never left the lab.

And I almost let him.

Almost.

But then Xero stepped between us.

“That’s enough,” he said.

And for the first time?

Zayton growled.

Zayton’s fingers brushed my stomach.

His eyes rolled back like he could feel the shard humming.

Like it was calling him too.

“I can hear it, K7,” he whispered. “It’s screaming to be free. Let me take it from you. You don’t need it.”

And then—

He lunged.

Faster than I thought he could move.

Both hands at my waist.

Fingernails digging.

Looking to cut me open.

I screamed.

But Xero was already there.

He grabbed Zayton by the throat and slammed him against the nearest wall—

Concrete cracked.

Zayton grinned through the pressure.

“Aw, look at you,” he choked out. “Playing bodyguard boyfriend. You think she don’t see what you are?”

Xero didn’t speak.

He hit him again.

Fist to jaw.

Then again.

Then again.

Until blood sprayed the floor in long, artistic lines.

Zayton kicked back.

Caught Xero in the ribs.

Then bit his arm.

“FUCK—”

Xero staggered.

Zayton grabbed a metal pipe from the floor and swung wide—

CLANG—

It hit a column beside my head, sparks raining down.

I grabbed the closest thing I could—

A shard of glass from one of the mannequin domes—

And stabbed it into Zayton’s leg.

He howled.

Not in pain.

In pleasure.

“That’s my girl!”

He turned to me.

Blood pouring from his mouth.

“You remember what we were? You and me? We were the weapon. We didn’t need handlers. We didn’t need code. We burned cities in simulation before we were even sixteen.”

“I’m not yours,” I said.

And then Xero tackled him through a pile of collapsing mannequins.

They hit the ground hard.

Zayton groaned—laughing even as he bled.

“You’re gonna feel it soon,” he said, slurring. “All that voice in your head? That ain’t them. It’s you.”

He started to crawl.

Still smiling.

Still talking.

“I didn’t break,” he rasped. “I evolved. I woke the fuck up. And now you’re gonna—”

THWACK.

Xero’s boot met his jaw.

He didn’t get up again.

Not fully.

Just sort of... twitched.

Breathing.

But done.

Xero didn’t look at me.

Just stood over him, chest heaving.

The room smelled like metal and rage.

I dropped the glass.

It hit the floor and shattered—

like me.

We left him there.

Not out of mercy.

But because what could we do?

There’s no cage for someone like Zayton.

No rehab.

No redemption arc.

Just a collapsed underground room full of plastic corpses and one man who never stopped loving the war.

Xero didn't speak until we were halfway back to the surface.

His knuckles were split.

His lip was swollen.

His eyes were tired.

"He knew your old self," he said.

"Yeah."

"He remembered you better than you do."

"Yeah."

He nodded.

That was the whole conversation.

Because what else could I say?

He was right.

By the time we got back to the surface, the rain had stopped.

The sky was that yellow-gray you only get in Tulsa when the city doesn't know what time it is.

We sat on a cracked stairwell outside an abandoned med clinic.

The kind with sun-bleached teddy bears still stuck in the window.

I asked, "Do you think I'll end up like him?"

He didn't answer right away.

Then:

"No."

I gave him a look.

He added:

"Not exactly like him."

I snorted. “Wow. Comforting.”

“I mean it,” he said. “You’re still fighting it.”

“What if I stop?”

“Then I’ll stop you.”

The shard in my stomach was quiet.

But it was still there.

Still warm.

Still watching.

And in the back of my head, a voice whispered:

“K4 signal: Dormant.

K2 signal: Lost.

K0: Active.”

I didn’t tell Xero what I heard.

And we started walking again.

Loose Dogs On The Street

“You sure it wasn’t you?” Kale said, pacing in a tight circle like a paranoid Roomba.

He jabbed a finger toward Michael.

Michael rolled his eyes. “Dog, if I was gonna betray you, I’d do it cool. Not with a fuckin’ Voodoo drive-by.”

Cash spun in his chair, clicking through surveillance archives with one hand and eating leftover spaghetti with the other.

“If anyone here’s dumb enough to spill the plan, it’s Ricardo.”

“Hey,” Ricardo said, pulling up his hoodie like a turtle. “I resent that. I’m very guarded. I keep all my secrets. Like... like that time I—uh...”

He trailed off.

“Exactly,” Cash muttered.

Kale turned to Trent, who was sitting on a plastic crate, eating his third hotdog with the intensity of a man who believed this was nutritional warfare.

“You,” Kale barked. “What’d you say? Who’d you talk to? Where were you two nights ago?”

Trent blinked, mouth full.

“Uh... I dunno,” he mumbled. “Bar... strip club... Duane’s cart.”

Everyone went silent.

Michael slowly sat forward. “Duane’s... cart?”

“Yeah,” Trent said proudly. “Best dogs in midtown. I got the extra relish—real nasty—”

Cash clicked back through a set of timestamps on an external camera feed near 31st and Yale.

Fast-forwarded.

Paused.

“Yo,” he said.

Everyone leaned in.

The grainy feed showed Trent in the glow of a neon HOTDOGS 24HR sign, gesturing wildly with a half-eaten chili dog in hand.

There was audio.

Cash boosted it.

“—and then we’re gonna jack the whole vault while them boneboys too busy cryin’ over their lil’ dead cousin. We got the cars, we got the route, we got THE DELPHI THING TOO, so if they try anything, ***BOOM—***we cook ‘em. Hotdog style, baby!”

There was a pause.

Then the unmistakable sound of Duane, the hotdog vendor, saying:

“Yo, that’s wild.”

Kale’s jaw dropped.

Ricardo fell off the couch laughing.

Michael wheezed. “Yo, no fuckin’ way you told Duane?”

Trent blinked again.

“...He looked trustworthy.”

Cash turned in his chair.

“So the whole Voodoo ambush was because you got drunk and monologued at a street meat dealer?”

Trent raised a finger, defensively.

“It was four hotdogs.”

“You’re four hotdogs of treason!” Kale exploded.

Michael stood up. “We’re visiting Duane. Right now.”

Trent: “Can I finish my—?”

Kale grabbed the hotdog out of his hand and threw it at the wall.

It stuck.

No one spoke for five seconds.

Then Ricardo:

“...That’s gonna stain.”

Duane’s cart was still there.

It was always there.

A silver relic parked next to an ATM that hadn’t worked since 2049.

The umbrella said DOGZ 4 DAYZ in faded red neon, and a small drone hovered lazily above it, projecting a jazz remix of the Halo theme.

Duane himself was exactly how I remembered:

- Dreadlocked and aggressively balding.
- Wearing a tactical apron.
- Smoking something not legally defined as tobacco.

He didn’t flinch when the Looney Goonz rolled up on him like suburban mafia.

“Y’all here for dogs or violence?” he asked casually.

Michael crossed his arms. “Bit of both.”

Kale stepped forward, fury in his posture, voice shaking with suppressed murder.

“You told the Voodoos about our heist,” he said.

Duane shrugged.

“Didn’t know it was a secret. Your boy there”—he pointed his tongs at Trent—“came by three nights in a row talking about ‘the big move’ like it was free advertising.”

Trent raised both hands. “I thought you were cool, Duane!”

“I am cool,” Duane said. “Which is why I sold that intel for two e-credits and a VIP pass to Club Semtex. Shit’s exclusive.”

Michael blinked. “That’s all you wanted?”

Duane lit his cigarette off the drone.

“Also got a coupon for no-cover Fridays.”

Kale looked ready to implode.

“You sold out an entire tactical operation for a fuckin’ club pass?”

Duane shrugged. “Gotta eat.”

Ricardo, deadpan: “Technically, so do we.”

He looked at the menu.

“I’ll take a Spicy Bloodhound with that turbo relish.”

“Dude,” Cash muttered.

“What?” Ricardo said. “I’m hungry.”

Kale reached for his pistol.

Michael put a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t shoot the hotdog man,” he said. “We’ve already hit peak comedy. It’ll only go downhill.”

Cash leaned against the cart. “Look, man. We just need to know—did you tell anyone else?”

Duane shook his head. “Naw. Just Voodoos. No one else listens like they do. Good tippers.”

Kale growled.

Ricardo took a bite of his hotdog. “Y’know, this is worth a betrayal or two.”

Duane winked.

“You get me.”

“Okay,” Kale said, pacing in tight circles. “Plan A—we torch the cart.”

Duane didn’t even look up from his grill.

“You torch this cart, I torch your reputations,” he said. “Y’all already look like methhead mall ninjas. Don’t push me.”

Michael, sitting cross-legged on a busted curb, sighed.

“New plan,” he said. “We embarrass him. Ruin his customer trust. Public humiliation is more sustainable.”

“Dox him?” Cash offered.

“We know where he is,” Ricardo said, chewing. “He’s always here. Doxing’s redundant.”

Kale: “Let’s hijack his drone.”

Duane: “Touch my drone, and I swear to god, I’ll lace your next dog with truth serum.”

Cash was already on his slate, fingers flying.

“Too late. I’m in.”

“Are you serious?” Duane barked.

The drone above them blinked twice, then lurched mid-air, spinning violently before switching its speaker to metalcore yodeling.

Everyone stared.

Ricardo coughed hotdog.

Michael slow-clapped.

“Congratulations,” he said. “We’ve started Drone War I.”

Kale, pointing at Duane’s face: “This is what happens when you betray criminals, you street mustard Judas.”

Duane calmly picked up a jar labeled “Hell Slop” and hurled it at Kale’s chest.

It shattered.

Kale screamed.

Michael doubled over laughing.

Cash was still in the drone, now using it to spell “TRAITOR” in smoke above the block.

Trent clapped. “This feels productive!”

Duane finally leaned over the cart, hands on the edge.

“You want revenge? Fine. You got thirty seconds before I call the Voodoos and the health inspector. We’ll see who survives longer—me or your cholesterol.”

Everyone froze.

Ricardo pointed at the drone, which had caught fire.

Cash quietly ended the hack.

Kale turned to Michael.

“Was this worth it?”

Michael lit a cigarette.

“Taste of betrayal’s better than ketchup on concrete.”

The war room smelled like hotdog vapor and rage.

Michael stood at the whiteboard with a stolen judge’s gavel made from a repurposed pipe wrench.

He banged it once.

“This trial will now commence,” he said. “The People versus Trent ‘Loose Lips, Full Wieners’ Yazzie.”

Trent sat on an overturned ammo crate, looking like a man who just found out he’s the only one who didn’t know it was Opposite Day.

“I move to represent myself,” Trent said confidently.

“Denied,” Cash shot back. “You don’t have the range.”

Ricardo wheeled in a metal chair and pointed dramatically.

“I will be your prosecution, and also your worst nightmare.”

“Why’s that?” Trent asked.

“Because I remember everything,” Ricardo whispered. “Even the bad Tinder dates you bragged about.”

Kale stood in the corner with his arms crossed like a disappointed dad about to take away a gaming console.

Cash clicked a remote. The overhead screen lit up with:

EXHIBIT A

Video still of Trent, drunk at Duane's cart, holding a hotdog like a microphone.

"Explain this," Cash said.

Trent scratched his head.

"...Context?"

"EXHIBIT B," Ricardo called, now wearing sunglasses for no reason.

He threw a folder on the table.

It was empty.

"I don't have more exhibits," he admitted. "But theatrics matter."

Michael banged the pipe gavel again.

"Enough," he said. "We've heard testimony. We've reviewed evidence. We've ***witnessed an embarrassment to operational secrecy that will haunt us for at least two memes' worth of time."

Kale stepped forward, holding a single sticky note.

"This is your punishment," he said.

He slapped it on Trent's forehead.

It read:

CLOSET DOG.

"What does that mean?" Trent asked, confused.

Cash pointed toward the hallway.

"You sleep in the hallway closet now. You have hallway privileges only. Your old room goes to anyone with a functioning brain."

Ricardo: "We're not mad. We're just violently disappointed."

Michael raised his gavel. "All in favor?"

Everyone said, "Aye."

Even Trent.

Then he stood up, shrugged, and walked toward the hallway.

"I call the left side of the closet," he muttered.

"You get no side," Kale shouted after him. "You sleep on the boxes."

"I got back problems, man!"

"GOOD."

"Wait. You did what with the drone?" I asked.

Michael took a long sip from a stolen cocktail glass. "Hijacked it. Kale nearly set it on fire. Ricardo ordered two hotdogs mid-revenge."

Xero and I exchanged a look.

We'd been gone for thirty-six hours.

And somehow, the house had degenerated into food-themed vengeance.

"Okay but why is there a mattress in the hallway closet?" I asked, pointing at the barely shut door behind me.

It creaked open.

Trent's head poked out like a raccoon in a people costume.

"Oh, hey," he said, bleary-eyed. "I live here now."

Xero blinked. "In the closet?"

"He got exiled," Ricardo said proudly.

"For espionage via street meat," added Cash.

Trent rubbed his face. "I was enthusiastic, not treasonous."

"You monologued our heist to Duane the hotdog man," Kale growled.

"Duane's reliable!"

"Duane flipped for a club pass and chili sauce."

Michael leaned over the table, slapping a map of the Voodoos' drone network down like it owed him rent. "Okay. Shut up. We've got Plan B locked in. Tomorrow night, we hit their aerial line, hijack the payload, and reroute to the church drop point. Clean, fast, no goddamn hotdog intermissions."

I looked around.

Saw the old seating chart still taped to the fridge.

Then pointed down the hall.

“So... since Trent’s in exile and his room is empty, can me and Xero just take it?”

Cash didn’t even blink.

“Absolutely.”

Ricardo: “God, yes. Please. It smells better already.”

Michael waved the idea through without looking up from the map.

Even Trent nodded from the closet.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s yours. Just don’t touch the stuffed animal in the vent. It’s cursed.”

I paused. “...Noted.”

Kale, arms crossed, frowned deep.

“What, we’re just gonna let him sleep in my wing now?”

Cash gave him a slow, blank stare.

“Are you still on that?”

Kale opened his mouth—

Closed it—

Stormed off.

Trent poked his head out again. “Can I have a nightlight?”

“No,” everyone said in unison.

New Room

I pushed the door open with my boot.

It made a wet creak, like the hinges were haunted by bad decisions.

The room smelled like stale gum, mildewed socks, and a chemical tang I refused to name.

Probably Trent's cologne.

Or his spirit.

"Cozy," I said flatly.

Xero stepped in behind me, ducking under the hanging lightbulb.

He didn't say anything at first.

Just looked around.

There was a bullet casing on the windowsill.

A broken VR visor on the shelf.

And in the far corner, a deflated body pillow with the face of some 1970s cartoon fox I didn't recognize—but judged immediately.

"Wow," I muttered. "How did no one notice he was the snitch?"

Xero crouched, opened the closet. Inside were three crumpled shirts, a can of beans, and a sock with blood on it.

He stood back up. "We need gloves."

I laughed. First time in hours.

We didn't talk about where we'd been.

Or what Zayton said.

Or the burn scar near my ribcage where the shard had gone quiet but not cold.

Instead, we cleared space.

He dragged the mattress to center.

I tossed the body pillow out the door like it had insulted my ancestors.

We found exactly one drawer not filled with empty gum wrappers and used lighters.

"Closet's got floor space," Xero said.

“For what, a crime shrine?”

He grinned. “Or our bags.”

We moved them in.

It was nothing.

A shitty room in a half-dead building with zero insulation.

But it felt like ours.

I flopped on the mattress and groaned.

Xero leaned on the wall, arms crossed.

“You take the right,” he said.

I raised an eyebrow. “What if I want the left?”

“You gonna fight me for it?”

I smiled. “Later. Gimme a minute to recover from Trent’s aesthetic.”

He looked around one last time.

“...It’s not so bad.”

And I almost believed him.

I unzipped my bag and dumped it out on the floor.

Three shirts.

One pair of shorts. Two pairs of joggers.

Three pairs of underwear.

A crushed pack of bubblegum, neon pink and stuck to itself.

Two stun rounds in a cracked plastic case.

Earbuds, Phone charger.

Xero’s bag was neater.

Folded.

Labeled.

Like someone taught him how to live inside order just long enough to make it hurt.

I glanced over as he pulled out a thin, black undershirt and set it on the edge of the bed.

He didn't fold it like a normal person—he pressed it flat like he was preparing it for an autopsy.

“You military?” I asked.

He didn't look up. “No.”

“...Trained?”

He nodded once.

Then unzipped the second pouch and pulled out a slim datatab, a half-empty water filter, and a single photo.

It was faded.

Too much sun, too many years.

I didn't ask who was in it.

He didn't offer.

Instead, he said, “You brought... gum.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Combat-ready mint failure.”

I flicked it toward him.

He caught it. Looked at it like it might bite.

“You always pack this light?” I asked.

“Only ever need two things,” he said. “A place to sleep. And a way out.”

I smiled without meaning to.

“Real romantic.”

He looked at me.

Eyes like old ash—still hot under the surface.

“You want romance?”

I snorted. “No.”

“Liar.”

We fell into silence again.

The kind that doesn't hurt. Just... presses in a little.

I tried not to stare at the way he sat.

Tried not to think about the shard.

Or the sound his voice made when he actually cared.

Instead, I shoved my gear under the bed and pulled off my boots.

He leaned his head back against the wall.

Closed his eyes.

And I let myself watch him.

For just a second.

Before it got weird.

We were sitting shoulder to shoulder.

Not touching.

But almost.

The window was cracked just enough to let in the sound of Cash **screaming** about chili somewhere in the kitchen.

I stared at the scuffed floorboards.

Xero stared at nothing.

"Do you ever think about leaving?" I asked.

"Here?"

"Yeah. The Goonz. This house. This whole city."

He didn't answer right away.

He just flexed one hand, like he was checking for pain.

Then:

"Sometimes."

I nodded. "Where would you go?"

He shrugged. "Somewhere quieter. Somewhere with fewer guns, maybe home, wherever that may be."

“You’d get bored in a week.”

“Two, tops.”

I smiled.

He didn’t.

Instead, he looked down. Voice low.

“You ask that like you want out.”

I hesitated.

“I want a choice,” I said. “That’s all.”

The shard pulsed—faint. Just under my skin.

I touched it unconsciously.

He watched the motion.

His gaze landed soft, too soft, on my ribs.

“You’re not like them,” he said.

“The Goonz?”

He nodded.

I scoffed. “Don’t say that. I’m every bit the mess they are.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

He hesitated.

Then:

“You still hope.”

I turned toward him.

“Why do you keep coming back?”

He didn’t blink. Didn’t move.

But I saw his throat shift.

Something caught.

Then he said:

“...Because you do.”

The silence that followed wasn't empty.

It was stacked.

Heavy with almosts.

We sat there.

Not touching.

But everything between us buzzed like wire.

He pulled the shirt over his head like it was nothing.

Like it wasn't going to ruin me.

I looked away.

Then looked back.

Because how could I not?

The glow was there—dim but undeniable.

A faint line of light just left of center down his spine, like a seam had opened and someone was stitching him shut with neon.

My own shard hummed.

It wasn't painful.

But it wasn't comfortable either.

It was like hearing your name called in a dream.

He caught me staring.

I didn't stop.

“You feel it too,” I said.

He nodded. Didn't speak.

Didn't need to.

I sat forward on the bed and lifted the edge of my shirt.

The light in my stomach was faint—rosy, low-frequency, like a dying star that hadn't figured out how to quit yet.

His eyes followed it.

And something changed behind them.

Not lust.

Not even fear.

Just recognition.

Like we were mirrors catching each other in our worst light.

"Any clue what it means?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. Just... when you're near me, it gets stronger."

"Same."

We didn't move.

Didn't reach for each other.

Just watched.

My breathing slowed.

His didn't.

I let the shirt fall back down.

He turned away.

No words.

But the room felt full.

Too much heartbeat for two people.

Too much something.

His shoulder was warm.

Not hot. Not sharp.

Just... there.

Solid in a way I hadn't felt in years.

I curled into him without meaning to, head tucked under his jaw, my arm across his stomach.

He didn't flinch.
Didn't move.
Just let it happen.
And that was the worst part.
That he let me.
Like he'd already decided I belonged there.
Like he wasn't surprised.
Outside the room, the Goonz were being themselves—loud, terrible, unkillable.
Someone was screaming about Ricardo hiding the controller in the toaster again.
Cash was cackling.
I heard glass break.
But none of it reached in here.
Not to this little bubble of breath and heartbeats.
I closed my eyes.
Let myself feel the way Xero's chest rose under my cheek.
Steady.
Measured.
Like he didn't need anything from me in that moment.
He didn't pull me closer.
Didn't push me away.
Just held me.
Like I was safe.
Like I was real.
And I hated how much I wanted to stay.
I thought about asking him what this meant.
But that would've ruined it.

Because if he gave it a name, I'd have to decide if I deserved it.

And I didn't.

Not yet.

So I just stayed there, breathing with him.

And let the world be quiet.

Just until tomorrow.

Crash

The roof of the old SunTech Tower felt like paper waiting to burn.

The heat shimmered off the rusted railing.

Tulsa glared at us like it dared us to be stupid.

So, naturally, we accepted.

Michael had his boot propped up on a box of leftover ammo, doing his best gritty squad leader stance.

"Alright," he said, chewing a stim stick. "You know the op. Sixteen carrier drones. Two payloads per. Voodoos use these runs to resupply their safehouses, including the—say it with me—really fun drugs and uncut credits."

Ricardo raised a hand. "Can I call this Operation Wing Clipper?"

Cash's voice crackled in from the comms:

"No, but you can shut the hell up and go where I tell you."

We were already laughing.

The tension needed it.

Michael split us fast:

"Team Alpha: Me, Ricardo, Karyna.

Team Bravo: Kale, Trent, and..."

He looked at Xero like he was pulling a name out of a fire.

"...Shadow Creep."

Xero gave him a lazy two-finger salute.

Kale groaned audibly. "I swear, if he does that 'vanish into smoke' thing mid-mission again, I'm throwing him off a building."

"I only do it when you're watching," Xero said without looking at him.

Trent snorted.

Xero turned to me.

We locked eyes.

The noise dulled.

The roof, the plan, the Goonz—all of it dropped away for half a second.

"Hey," he said. Soft.

And before I could ask what—

He kissed me.

Quick.

Real.

No buildup.

Just his mouth on mine, his hand brushing the back of my neck.

Like he'd already decided this wasn't goodbye—but might be.

Then he pulled back, looked me dead in the eye, and said:

"Be safe, Karyna."

And then he was gone.

Heading for the opposite fire escape with Kale and Trent trailing behind.

Ricardo blinked.

"Well shit."

Michael chuckled. "Didn't think emo Jesus had it in him."

Cash, over comms:

“I’m just saying, statistically, the guy with face tattoos always steals the girl. Sorry, Kale.”

Kale’s voice popped on the channel.

“I WILL crash this mission on purpose.”

“Alright, children,” Cash said over the comm, “Papa’s gonna jam some wings.”

The hum of overhead engines shifted—like an entire cloud of metal bees just realized they were drunk.

We watched the drones stagger lower, weaving just a little off pattern.

Michael grinned.

“Showtime.”

He motioned, and we dropped—

One by one, rooftop to ledge to rusty fire escape.

Team Alpha peeled off into shadow.

I could already feel the shard buzzing low and warm beneath my ribs.

Adrenaline.

Or Xero.

Probably both.

—

Team Bravo.

Kale kicked open the door to an adjacent tower, stomping up the stairs like he was mad at every stair for existing.

Trent trudged behind him, carrying an oversized EMP cannon that looked like it had been built in a scrapyard by rats on meth.

Xero?

Already on the roof.

Silent. Leaning against the satellite dish.

“How the hell did you—” Kale stopped. “You know what? Never mind.”

“You keep asking questions you don’t want the answers to,” Xero said, watching the drones through tinted lenses.

Kale gritted his teeth.

“You kiss her once and suddenly you’re Mister Vanish-and-Vibe. What’s next, poetry?”

“I don’t write poetry.”

“Uh-huh.”

Xero turned slightly, voice cool.

“But if I did, it’d probably be about her.”

Trent let out a choked laugh.

“Yo Kale, you okay? Your skin’s doing that blotchy rage thing again.”

“I’m FINE,” Kale said, too loud.

Cash crackled over the comms.

“You’re not fine. Your biometrics are spiking and you’re clenching the mic button.”

Xero said nothing.

Just cracked his knuckles and stepped into position.

The man moved like he’d been born inside a shadow.

Kale whispered under his breath: “I hope he gets stung by a drone.”

Trent: “You know what that sounds like? Jealousy.”

Meanwhile - Team Alpha.

We were one alley deep, crouched behind a busted trash hauler as the first wave of drones whirred overhead.

Ricardo was humming the Mission: Impossible theme very off-key.

Michael loaded a burst round and whispered, “Eyes up, mouths shut. Two of those birds got Voodoo payloads. We snatch ’em on the drop—clean and fast.”

I barely heard him.

My heart was still somewhere back on that rooftop.

That kiss was echoing.

Worse than a shot.

More dangerous than the shard.

But I shook it off.

This was the op.

And I never missed the mark.

Michael's voice was low in my comm.

"Eyes up, Karyna. We got it."

The Voodoo drone blinked into view above the alley, hovering like a metal vulture on ketamine.

Ricardo raised his net-launcher, one eye squinting like he was aiming through vibes alone.

He fired.

The drone dropped like a stone, tangled in shimmering mesh and flailing rotors.

Michael caught it mid-crash, groaning.

"Still got it, bitches."

I was already moving toward the payload casing when the sky lit up.

Team Bravo.

"I'm telling you it's clear," Kale said.

Xero's voice cut in sharp. "It's too clear."

Trent was already halfway across the roof, EMP cannon wobbling like it wanted a different career path.

Kale stepped forward—

And hit the sensor.

There was no beep. No warning.

Just a sound like thunder having a seizure.

The drone detonated in a pulse of blue fire, hurling them all backward.

Kale hit the ground with a crack.

Trent screamed and sailed straight through the nearest skylight, cannon and all.

Cash's voice exploded over comms.

"WHO THE HELL STEPPED ON THE BOMB BIRD?!"

Kale, coughing: "I thought it was dead!"

Xero emerged from the smoke without a scratch, brushing embers from his coat.

Of course.

He looked down at Kale and said, dry as asphalt,

"Your contribution to this mission has been unforgettable."

Kale flipped him off without looking.

Meanwhile - Team Alpha.

We heard the explosion.

Felt it in the pavement.

Michael swore. "That sounded like Bravo-level dumbassery."

Then—another sound.

High-pitched. Getting louder.

I looked up and screamed, "DUCK!"

Ricardo burst around the corner on a stolen city-issue hoverbike, flying at exactly the speed of regret.

"HEY GUYS!" he yelled, swerving wildly. "I BROUGHT TRANSPORT!"

"WHY?!" Michael screamed.

Ricardo shrugged. "I DUNNO I PANICKED!"

He clipped a dumpster, bounced, and flew straight into a Voodoo supply van, airbag deploying after impact.

I facepalmed so hard I saw static.

Michael just sighed and said, "God, I love this team."

I turned the corner just in time to see a Voodoo with a nailgun get drop-kicked through a vending kiosk.

Xero landed behind him, expression calm.

“You always show up when shit’s on fire,” I said, stepping over a burning crate.

He looked at me, smirked.

“You say that like it’s a complaint.”

Another drone shrieked overhead.

We ducked—split like it was choreographed.

Two Voodoos came running from the north alley.

I didn’t have to call it.

He went high, I went low.

My boot cracked the kneecap of the first; his elbow crushed the throat of the second.

Boom.

Gone.

Blood sprayed the wall in wide, ugly arcs.

Xero didn’t flinch.

I didn’t either.

Not anymore.

The payload was exactly where the intel said it would be—

Behind a shattered stairwell, wrapped in red polymer chains and overkill.

“Got it,” I said, hoisting the case with a grunt. “Heavier than it looks.”

“You say that every time.”

“Shut up and cover me.”

He did.

The sky was flickering with smoke and drone guts.

Cash shouted in our ears to reroute—backup Voodoos were en route fast.

Michael’s voice cut in:

“We’ve got about ninety seconds before this block turns into Chernobyl With Bass. MOVE.”

We ran.

I didn’t need to look to know he was beside me.

We cut through the alley.

Vaulted a rail.

Crushed a stack of crates.

Behind me, I felt him move—fluid, precise, utterly lethal.

And then something hit me:

Our shards—mine in my stomach, his in his back—were glowing harder.

Together.

With every move we made, they pulsed.

Like our bodies were mirroring some invisible signal.

I looked at him.

He was already looking at me.

Didn’t say a word.

Just nodded.

We didn’t need words.

Not here.

Not like this.

We were synced.

In blood, breath, and violence.

And it felt good.

Too good.

The booth was vinyl. Sticky.

Smelled like rancid onion rings and bleach.

Michael was leaning against the window, shirt half-torn, blood on his sleeve, grinning like a maniac.

“Three payloads. One massive explosion. Two concussions. I’m calling that a win.”

Kale, across from him, was holding an ice pack to his arm and scowling.

“Next time, we don’t let Face Tattoo Lovechild run point.”

Xero, next to me, was sipping a black coffee like nothing had happened.

“Wasn’t running point,” he said. “Just catching you when you fell.”

Kale’s eyes narrowed. “You think you’re so clever.”

“I don’t think. I know.”

Ricardo stumbled back to the table, holding four milkshakes, none of which were the right flavor.

“I think I cracked a rib,” he said cheerfully. “Also, they won’t let me in the kitchen anymore.”

“What do you mean they won’t let you in the kitchen anymore?” I asked

Trent slumped into the seat next to him, a paper towel shoved up one nostril.

“I saw God, and she was disappointed.”

Cash’s voice buzzed over the comm unit on the table, the only one still powered.

“Confirming you idiots are alive. Good. Bring back the payload before it gets moldy. And someone please check on Kale’s emotional state. He’s been biometric-spiking since Xero kissed Karyna.”

Everyone turned and looked at Kale.

Kale just groaned into his milkshake.

Ricardo pointed a fry at him. “Bro, you’re so cucked right now.”

Michael nearly choked on his burger. “Leave him alone. He’s grieving the loss of a hypothetical.”

Kale: “I hate all of you.”

Xero said nothing.

I didn’t either.

I just sat there, next to him, arms brushing.

Not touching.

But close.

Too close not to mean something.

Too close to mean nothing.

I kept my eyes on my fries.

My shard buzzed like a nervous heartbeat.

I didn't know what he was.

Didn't know what this was.

But I knew this:

I wasn't scared of him.

I was scared of how much I wasn't.

And that was so much worse.

Blueprints and Bullshit

The blueprints were spread out on the living room floor like a sacrificial offering.

Half the crew was eating fast food off of them.

Cash sat cross-legged in the middle, pointing at a glowing schematic with a jalapeño popper like it was a wand of ancient power.

“Okay, so... this—this is The Reservoir. Jonhower’s off-grid pleasure palace slash cyber-mausoleum for his giant-ass ego.”

Michael leaned over, chewing a toothpick. “Looks small.”

Cash laughed. “That’s just the above-ground level.”

He tapped the screen. The blueprint pulsed and shifted—revealing three underground floors, thermal grids, vaults, AI-controlled locks, and one room labeled simply: CORE.

Ricardo squinted. “What’s in the Core?”

Cash shrugged. “Dunno. Best guess? Illegal.”

Kale cracked his knuckles. “I don’t care if it’s a box of kidneys or blackmail tapes. If it’s locked, I’m stealing it.”

“Wow,” Trent muttered. “Put that on a t-shirt.”

I sat on the arm of the couch, sipping flat soda, eyes tracking the lines of the blueprint.

None of this looked real.

It looked suicidal.

Verogon Oil wasn’t a gang.

It wasn’t even a corp you could bribe.

It was a church with guns.

Xero was standing by the window, arms crossed, gaze unreadable.

He hadn’t spoken since Cash started.

But I saw the way his eyes tracked the schematic.

Not curiosity.

Recognition.

He knew something.

And he wasn’t saying.

Yet.

Cash clapped his hands. “So! Entry plan: we don’t have one.”

Kale: “Inspiring.”

Cash: “We recon first. Figure out rotations, security routes, AI behavior patterns—”

Michael cut in. “—then hit it fast, loud, and mean.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And escape?”

Silence.

Ricardo raised a burrito. “We die in style?”

Nobody laughed.

Not really.

But the grin on Michael’s face was too wide.

The glint in Kale’s eyes too bright.

The twitch in Xero’s fingers too still.

And I realized—they’d already decided.

This wasn’t a pitch.

It was a launch.

And we were already in the air.

“You don’t look like a contractor,” Kale muttered, adjusting the flimsy orange vest he’d stolen off a real contractor five minutes ago.

Michael grinned, slapping a fake ID badge onto his chest that read:

JERALD TANK

PLUMBING - EMOTIONAL + PHYSICAL

“I am a contractor,” he said proudly. “I contract pain.”

They passed the first checkpoint at the Reservoir’s outer staff gate—a small office staffed by an ex-military goon chewing gum like it owed him money.

The scanner buzzed as Kale swiped his forged badge.

He held his breath.

Then—

GREEN LIGHT.

The guard grunted. “You’re late.”

Michael nodded solemnly. “Traffic and trauma, my man.”

Meanwhile, across the plaza, Ricardo and Trent were creating maximum confusion.

Ricardo wore a sunhat and a dirty lab coat, holding a clipboard upside-down.

Trent had six hot dogs stuffed in his vest like they were grenades.

“We’re with pest control,” Ricardo told the nearest garden drone, which ignored him.

“Big rat problem,” Trent added, pointing at the fountain. “They got religion. Formin’ a cult. Shit’s escalating.”

A real Veroguard wandered over, frowning.

“Do you have authorization?”

Ricardo just looked up and said:

“Do you have inner peace?”

By the time the guard called it in, they were already gone.

Trent accidentally stole a box of fertilizer on the way out.

At 3:08 a.m., I slipped through the perimeter hedges behind Xero, wearing blackout thermals and a hooded coat that reeked of chlorine and old blood.

The Reservoir rose in the dark like a monument to paranoia.

Three levels visible.

Surveillance domes on the roof.

Slick mirrored windows.

No walls—just fields of infrared light.

“Ever been here before?” I asked.

He didn’t look back.

“Not officially.”

We dropped into a ditch, crawling under the thermal mesh.

The hum of surveillance was like a mosquito in your brain.

As we moved beneath it, our shards buzzed in sync.

Not strong.

But constant.

Like it knew we were somewhere we shouldn't be.

From the hill above, I saw the vault tower.

It had no windows.

No access points.

Just a sealed silver monolith rising from the earth.

"What's in that?" I whispered.

Xero's voice was soft.

"Something Dwight doesn't want anyone to survive touching."

That glow again—faint pink, under his shirt.

I didn't ask.

Not yet.

We regrouped at 4:12 a.m., back at the van, covered in dirt and pride.

Cash handed out energy chews and said, "So, bad news: every wall is watching. Good news: I found a backdoor in their AI."

Michael lit a cigarette off his wrist-lighter.

"We're doing this."

Nobody disagreed.

And all I could think about was:

That vault.

That glow.

And the way Xero never flinched near danger.

Only near me.

The moment we walked into the Reservoir's south atrium, I knew we didn't belong.

The place looked like a rich person's dream about clean sin.

Glass everything.

Silver everything else.

Soft jazz piped through ultrasonic air vents designed to seduce your inner ear.

And us?

We looked like a traveling art project about poor decisions.

Michael wore a rented tux with bloodstained boots.

Kale was in a tight silk shirt he found in Ricardo's pile of laundry—midriff showing, rage simmering.

Trent had a velvet blazer over no shirt and a belt of mystery pills.

Cash was pretending to be French.

Ricardo wasn't pretending anything. Just drinking.

And me?

Kale's eyes hadn't left me since we arrived.

The dress I wore was black and clung to me like it wanted to apologize.

I hated how good I looked in it.

Xero hadn't said a word since seeing me.

But I felt it.

The way he lingered nearby.

Like he couldn't stop.

"Okay," Michael said, lifting a champagne flute off a tray. "Everyone mingle, stay casual, don't touch anything unless it glows or costs over ten million credits."

"Wait," I said. "What's glowing?"

He winked. "You'll know."

Ten minutes later, Kale was arguing with a bartender about whether whiskey counts as a meal.

Cash had disappeared into the server wing, muttering in bad accents.

Ricardo was collecting shrimp cocktails in his inner jacket pockets.

Trent had been escorted out and snuck back in wearing a chef's hat.

I wandered to the east hall to breathe.

And that's when I saw her.

Not a person.

A screen.

Set into the mirror of a too-clean bathroom.

The AI.

DOROTHY.

She blinked on with a soft, maternal voice.

"Hello, Miss Vladislav. Do you feel out of place?"

My skin went cold.

"Not especially," I lied.

"Your pulse says otherwise. You hide it well."

My shard buzzed.

She knew.

"You carry an artifact. Old code. New blood. You will try to steal from Mr. Jonhower. You will fail."

"Is that a threat?"

"No. Just a forecast."

She smiled.

And shut off.

Back in the ballroom, Xero caught my arm as I returned, eyes sharp.

“You’re pale.”

“Bathroom AI flirted with me.”

“...What?”

I shrugged.

“Just Tulsa things.”

The plan was too clean.

Which meant it would bleed.

Cash whispered into my earbud:

“We’re in. AI core compromised. Xero’s disabling security paths. You’re green.”

“Copy.”

Michael, Kale, Ricardo, and I split off from the gala floor like a spill across marble.

We passed biometric doors, facial scanners, and a drone that looked way too friendly.

Ricardo waved at it. “You see that one wink?”

“It doesn’t have eyelids,” Kale muttered.

“Exactly.”

The vault sat in the center of a neon-lit chamber beneath the east wing.

Polished silver.

No handle.

Just a pulse sensor and a black glass screen.

Cash buzzed in:

“Karyna, palm on the panel. You go first.”

I touched it.

The shard buzzed, hard.

The screen came to life with a riddle.

“I am always hungry. I must always be fed. The finger I touch will soon turn red. What am I?”

Ricardo said, without pause:

“Michael’s ex-wife.”

Silence.

The screen blinked green.

“Correct.”

We all stared at him.

“...What?” he said. “I read riddles for vibes.”

The vault opened.

And all I felt was wrong.

Inside was a case.

Floating in zero-G suspension.

Black glass, wired to six thermal conductors.

Beneath it:

Data cubes.

Old-school credit blocks.

A glowing metal canister the size of a wine bottle.

Pink light leaked from it like a heartbeat through bone.

I stepped forward, trance-like.

Kale: “Should we... maybe not touch the glowing alien piss tube?”

Michael: “Too late.”

I reached out.

The shard under my ribs buzzed in tune.

Xero’s voice—urgent—in my ear:

“Karyna. Don’t. Touch. That.”

I froze.

Ricardo, behind me, pulled a lever for fun.

The lights went red.

Sirens.

Drones hissed awake from the ceiling.

DOROTHY's voice boomed through the chamber:

"You should have stayed in the shallow end."

And then everything went to hell.

"Grab the case!" I screamed.

Ricardo did it upside-down.

Somehow.

Kale lobbed a flash grenade behind us that exploded with a sound like a tuba committing murder.

Michael took a shot to the side and didn't slow down.

He just said, "I like this shirt," and punched the next guard through a data console.

We bolted down the servant tunnel.

Cash's voice in our ears:

"Exit gate's locked. Emergency detour: maintenance garage. North wing. There's... a golf cart."

Trent: "Are you serious?"

Cash: "It's street legal!"

We burst into the garage like a fever dream in formalwear.

There it was.

Verogon Security Transport Cart.

White, gold-trimmed, ugly as sin.

Ricardo leapt into the driver's seat.

“DIBS!”

“No,” Michael growled, bleeding.

Ricardo yanked the wheel.

“TOO LATE!”

The cart took off, zero to thirty in eventually.

We skidded through corridors while alarm klaxons howled and DOROTHY whispered passive-aggressive poetry through the intercom.

I held the nanotech canister against my chest.

It pulsed with the same beat as my shard.

Like it knew me.

Xero—running beside us—locked eyes with me.

I didn’t ask what he saw.

He already looked afraid.

The gates blew open from Cash’s remote charge.

We sped into the street, tires squealing, headlights off.

Behind us, the Reservoir swarmed with guards and blinking drones.

Ahead: midnight.

Broken Tulsa.

Freedom.

For now.

Somewhere in a private chamber under the estate, Dwight Jonhower rewound the footage.

Paused on my face.

On the shard.

He sipped his drink, slow and surgical.

“Send word to everyone who matters,” he said to the dark.

Then he opened a glowing list on his terminal.

Our names were already there.

And next to mine?

He typed one word:

Priority.

Shells N Shrapnel

You ever see a grown man try to play croquet with the intensity of a prison fight?

That was Kale.

Sweat dripping, brows furrowed, swinging a mallet like it owed him money.

“You cheated, Ricardo,” he snarled, lining up a shot that somehow involved threatening a lawn chair.

Ricardo stood barefoot in the grass wearing a sleep shirt with a cat smoking a cigarette and swim goggles.

He raised his arms dramatically. “I don’t believe in cheating. I believe in spiritual efficiency.”

Michael snorted, watching from the sidelines while gnawing on a boiled sausage.

“Ricardo’s ball’s been under the grill for twenty minutes.”

“Don’t shame my tactics.”

Cash was manning the grill.

By “manning,” I mean burning.

“I’m not a chef,” he said. “I’m an alchemist.”

Trent was eating crawfish directly from the pot with his hands and zero hesitation.

And Xero?

Xero held his croquet mallet like it might explode.

He was standing two feet from his ball, eyeballing it like a sniper.

Deep breath.

Focused swing.

The mallet missed completely.

Whiffed so hard he spun halfway around.

“...Did I win?” he asked flatly.

Kale burst out laughing. “What the hell was that?”

“Experimental technique.”

“You look like a malfunctioning Roomba.”

I was sitting on a half-collapsing cooler, watching the game with a half-warm soda in one hand and a growing pit in my stomach.

The canister—the one we pulled from Jonhower’s vault—was zipped inside my coat.

It hadn’t stopped humming since we stole it.

Neither had the shard inside me.

I hadn’t told anyone it was syncing faster.

Or that sometimes, when I slept, I saw DOROTHY’s smile in my dreams.

Ricardo was mid-swing—using a leg of crawfish as aim assistance—when I heard it.

That wrong pitch.

High. Artificial.

Predator-slick.

Then—

CRACK!

POP! POP!

BOOM.

Gunfire.

The fence exploded.

Three black-armored Verogon operatives burst in with shock rifles and retractable blades.

Behind them?

A hovering drone shaped like a spider crossed with a hate crime.

They opened fire without a word.

Michael flipped the picnic table.

Ricardo threw his mallet like it was cursed.

Xero, somehow, already had a knife.

Kale ran toward gunfire yelling,

“YOU CRASHED MY COOKOUT?!”

Trent hit the ground, crawfish still in hand.

“I’m eating!”

One of the guards raised a charge pistol.

I felt heat burn under my ribs.

The canister buzzed.

Then glowed. Shot something out.

The guard seized.

Choked.

Dropped dead. Smoke curled from inside his armor.

Xero turned—eyes locking with mine.

“Did you do that?”

“I don’t know.”

But I did.

Sort of.

Whatever’s inside me?

It’s not quiet anymore.

By the time it ended, the yard looked like a butcher shop inside a war dream.

Blood in the grass.

Drone parts in the crawfish pot.

Ricardo was eating again.

Michael lit a cigarette with shaky hands.

Kale wiped his forehead with a plate.

Trent whispered, “I’m never playing croquet again.”

Xero walked over to me.

“They found us.”

I nodded.

“Time to find out who told them where to look.”

The backyard smelled like burnt crawfish, fried metal, and regret.

“Goddamn,” Michael muttered, flipping over one of the Veroguards with his boot. “You ever seen armor this high-grade on a hit squad?”

Cash crouched beside the corpse, yanking out a chip from the nape socket.

“Not a squad. Prototype kill team. These boys were leased, not assigned.”

Ricardo was licking blood off his knuckles with zero awareness.

“Think I broke a drone with my soul. Pretty sure.”

“You tripped into it,” I said.

“And that’s spiritual warfare, girl.”

Trent stood nearby, wearing one of the guard’s helmets like a trophy.

“Yo, I look amazing.”

Kale snorted. “You look like a bad Halloween costume.”

“No,” Cash said without looking up. “He looks like bait. Get that shit off.”

Xero and I were kneeling beside a destroyed drone—black-plated, spider-legged, humming with shutdown static.

I pried open its access panel with a croquet mallet out of stubborn spite.

Inside: a sealed datacore.

Still blinking.

Xero reached to touch it—then stopped.

“Wait.”

I looked up.

“Biometric lock.”

He nodded.

“This one was tracking you specifically.”

My stomach went cold.

The shard in my gut buzzed like it recognized itself.

Cash got the core open ten minutes later using a plasma arc lighter and a knife stolen from the kitchen.

Inside?

A cluster of encrypted tags. One stood out.

CONTACT: G-22-NINELINE

STREET POINT: CHERRY & UTICA

VEROGON PAYMENT CLEARED

Michael leaned in.

“That’s a contact address. Someone called us in.”

Ricardo stared.

“What kinda rat bastard snitches on a croquet game?”

Trent went pale.

“...I might’ve told a girl at the gas station that we were laying low again.”

“Jesus Christ,” Kale hissed.

“You don’t know she’s a Verogon snitch! She laughed at my joke! That’s human!”

Xero looked at me.

No smirk this time.

No teasing.

“Whoever gave us up knew exactly when we were vulnerable.”

The pink glow beneath my ribs flared.

“They want what’s in me.”

Cash nodded grimly.

“And they’re willing to send war-bots to a backyard party to get it.”

I looked at the others—blood-slick, half-laughing, bruised, alive.

Then I looked at the drone’s busted eye-lens.

My reflection warped in it.

This wasn’t a hit.

It was a test.

And now?

Verogon knew we were worth chasing.

We rolled up to Cherry & Utica in the loudest van on this side of Tulsa.

Ricardo had taped “FREE WI-FI” on the back in glitter glue.

Cash was at the wheel, chewing his cuticles and muttering,

“If this is a setup, we’ve got maybe twelve seconds before someone’s head explodes. Hopefully not mine.”

Michael cocked his rifle and shrugged.

“I got five kills last week off worse odds. One was a folding chair.”

The contact point was an old cyber-lounge-turned-burnout-bar called The Neon Gallows.

Looked like someone set it on fire in a dream.

No lights.

Windows boarded.

Sign swinging like it was waiting to fall on somebody dumb.

Which meant: Perfect.

Inside, it smelled like old synthetic bourbon, fried data chips, and rat piss.

Kale muttered, “Place gives me syphilis just lookin’ at it.”

Trent poked a wall and said, “Yo, this mold is conscious.”

Xero stayed quiet, scanning the shadows.

I moved ahead with my pistol drawn.

Behind the counter, we found a body.

Still alive.

Barely.

Middle-aged.

Half-cybered.

Tattooed barcode under one eye.

Verogon runner, no doubt.

His legs were burned.

Torso cracked.

Voice: rasp and static.

He looked up at me and smiled.

“Shouldn’t have come,” he croaked.

Kale squatted down. “Yeah, we get that a lot. Talk.”

The man coughed—wet and thick.

“They wanted me quiet... but not yet. They were waiting... for a confirmation.”

Xero’s eyes narrowed. “Confirmation of what?”

The informant looked straight at me.

Not my face.

My chest.

The shard.

The canister.

Whatever I was.

“You got the seed, girl. And they want to wake it up.”

My spine locked.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

His lips cracked into a half-dead grin.

“They sent him. The one they can’t control.”

Ricardo leaned in. “Who?”

The man whispered—then flatlined.

But we heard it.

A single name:

“K9.”

I stepped back, pulse crawling under my skin.

Michael cursed under his breath.

Cash whispered, “No... he’s real?”

Xero finally spoke.

Low. Bitter.

“I hoped that bastard was dead.”

We didn’t speak much on the way back.

Kale kept bouncing his knee like it owed him.

Michael drove.

Too calm.

That was never a good sign.

Ricardo was in the back seat, whispering, “K-9... like a dog, right? Like the letter K, not cay-nine. That’s important.”

“Shut up,” Cash and Trent said at the same time.

Back at the house, Cash dumped his tablet on the kitchen table, fingers flying.

“Alright,” he muttered. “Let’s peek into the mouth of hell.”

He accessed an encrypted darknet vault using six fake credentials and a nude photo of Trent from 2054.

Trent: “Wait—what?!”

Cash: “It worked. You’re welcome.”

He pulled the file.

SUBJECT: ZAYTON ANDRE

ALIAS: K9

STATUS: UNCHAINED

ACCESS LEVEL: REDACTED

LAST KNOWN EMPLOYMENT: VEROGON BLACK PROGRAM "LATCHKEY"

NOTES:

- Highly unstable. Capable of unpredictable sexual violence.
- Unclear if human or post-bioform.
- Refuses psychiatric protocol. Refers to himself in third person.
- Last seen laughing while removing his own tooth and inserting a memory chip.

Michael exhaled. "Jesus."

Kale leaned over the screen. "This guy is who they sent for us?"

Ricardo: "Yo I respect that tooth chip thing though. Like what's the symbolism."

Cash deadpanned, "Symbolism is he's nuts."

I didn't say anything.

Because my shard?

Buzzing.

Tight and fast.

Like it recognized something.

Like it had history with whatever K9 was.

Xero sat on the windowsill, jaw tense.

I finally asked, "You knew him?"

He nodded. Once.

"We were... locked up. Same lab. Same floor. He wasn't like us. He liked it."

He didn't look at me.

Just out the window.

"If he's loose? He's looking for you now."

Silence spread over the room like a wet cloth over a gas fire.

The House felt smaller.

Like K9 was already inside.

We boarded the windows.

Michael did it with four nails and zero mercy.

Kale added tripwires.

Trent “secured” the bathroom with a Super Soaker full of tequila.

Ricardo left fried pickles at the door “as tribute.”

I lay awake on the couch, watching the shadows slide.

Everyone pretended to sleep.

Except me.

And Xero.

He was sitting by the window in his undershirt, boots on, eyes too still.

“You hear that?” I whispered.

He didn’t turn.

Just said, “Yes.”

It was faint.

Out near the sidewalk.

A sound like metal fingers dragging across asphalt.

Then...

a bark.

High. Glitchy.

Too human.

We didn't move.

Xero raised one finger.

Then the motion sensors by the garage lit up.

Outside, a shape flickered on the edge of the cameras.

Too fast.

Too thin.

It skittered.

Not walked.

Not ran.

Skittered.

Like joy with bones.

I looked down.

The shard beneath my ribs?

Cold now.

Not warm.

Like it didn't want to be found.

The sound came again.

This time closer.

The porch light flickered.

A giggle.

Like a child.

Or someone pretending to be one.

Then—

SCRATCH.

On the door.

Just once.

A single slow scrape.

Like a promise.

“Stay here,” Xero said.

I didn’t.

We both crept toward the front hall.

Ricardo stirred on the kitchen counter but didn’t wake.

Cash’s room glowed behind a pile of monitors.

Michael’s axe leaned by the fridge.

I took it.

At the door, we paused.

Silence.

Then—

A note slid under the door.

Just a scrap of crumpled receipt paper.

Xero picked it up.

Unfolded.

Read it aloud.

“I missed you at the lab. Can I pet it this time?”

My mouth went dry.

He flipped it over.

Scrawled on the back:

“-K9”

And just like that?

The Goonz weren't predators anymore.

We were prey.

Gone Girl

The first sign was no power.

The House of Hoodlums went dead at 2:16 a.m.

No music.

No glow from Cash's servers.

No hum in the war room.

Just black.

And breathing.

But not ours.

Trent was the first to say it.

“Hey, uh... I just heard a whisper that wasn't me.”

Then a flashbang came through the living room window.

We hit the floor as the wall blew out.

Laser fire.

Smoke.

Yelling in Creole slang.

“VOODOOS!” Ricardo screamed, diving behind the fridge.

“AND VEROGON,” Cash snapped, already rerouting power from a car battery and hate.

Kale, half-dressed, speared a guy through the drywall and roared like a demon.

I grabbed my pistol and turned—

Only to see three shapes in full armor barrel toward me.

Xero intercepted two.

Fast. Brutal.

His blade found throats like magnets.

But the third?

He didn’t shoot me.

He just stabbed me in the neck with something cold.

My world tilted.

The ceiling bent sideways.

My limbs felt unplugged.

The shard buzzed wildly, like panic trapped in a cage.

I heard shouting.

Gunfire.

Then hands.

On me.

Dragging.

A drone above.

Wind.

Weightlessness.

Below, I saw Xero.

Running.

Not toward safety.

Toward me.

His face wasn't angry.

It was something colder.

He reached out.

I tried to reach out—

But the tranq did its job.

And the world dropped.

Back in the House of Hoodlums, the firefight ended in blood.

Bodies everywhere.

Kale was coughing up smoke, standing on top of a dead Voodoo yelling,

“WHO ELSE WANTS A Mallet MASSAGE?”

Michael was wounded.

Ricardo's nose was broken.

Cash was screaming about “an encrypted flight pattern.”

But no one asked the obvious.

Xero just walked back inside covered in someone else's blood.

He looked at the spot where I'd been.

Didn't say a word.

Just picked up my jacket.

And left the room.

The lights were still flickering.

Furniture was smashed to hell.

Half the kitchen had bullet holes.

Cash was hunched over the server rack, sweating like the world owed him an apology.

“Tracer lines are dirty,” he muttered. “They flew her out north-by-east. Some kinda stealth evac. Whoever ran this knew how to vanish.”

Kale tossed a corpse into the backyard like trash with bad timing.

He stomped back in, growling:

“Somebody better start naming names before I go full rodeo on these Voodoo leftovers.”

In the living room, Xero sat very still.

Covered in blood.

Holding nothing.

His coat was off.

His tattooed hands were shaking.

Barely.

But enough for us to see.

Ricardo opened his mouth to say something dumb.

Stopped.

Then sat beside him in silence.

Kale came in hot, threw a chair across the room, and yelled,

“HOW THE HELL THEY GET HER? WE WERE RIGHT THERE.”

Xero didn’t look up.

Didn’t blink.

Didn’t speak.

Trent, of all people, said, "...Yo. He's not okay."

No one argued.

Michael dragged in a barely-alive Voodoo, dropped him on the rug like a wet duffel bag full of poor decisions.

"Speak," Michael said, putting a blade to the guy's very exposed femoral artery.

The guy choked, spat blood, mumbled:

"She's... the girl with the seed. That's what they call her. Ain't about money. Ain't about the shard."

Xero finally spoke.

His voice was ash.

"What is it about?"

The Voodoo coughed.

"Project Delphi. It's inside her. Something Verogon made. Or stole. They don't want her dead. They want her open."

Michael's blade twitched.

But Xero stepped forward.

"Where are they taking her?"

The guy laughed.

"Where you can't go."

Xero didn't blink.

Didn't curse.

Just reached behind him and snapped the man's neck like he was ending a conversation.

Nobody moved.

Cash looked at him.

Xero finally met his eyes.

“Can you find her?”

Cash hesitated. Then nodded once.

“I’ll try.”

Xero sat back down on the floor.

His hands were still shaking.

Kale looked at Michael.

Michael looked at Xero.

Then Michael said, very quietly:

“We’re gonna get her back.”

Xero didn’t answer.

But he picked up my jacket from where it had fallen.

Folded it in his lap.

And didn’t move again.

The war room smelled like burnt circuits and bad intentions.

The assassin was tied to an old dentist chair they pulled out of Trent’s “vintage junk pile.”

Nobody asked why he had that.

Kale cracked his knuckles.

Xero just stood behind him, expressionless.

Cash wired up a feedback loop to the guy’s optic implants.

“Every time he lies, this thing burns his retinas a little.”

Michael handed Kale a wrench the size of a femur.

Ricardo poked his head in. "Y'all need... snacks or... emotional support?"

"Out," Xero said.

The door closed.

Kale grinned.

The assassin said nothing.

Xero said even less.

Then it started.

Kale: "I'm gonna ask one question. And I want you to lie."

CRACK.

The wrench came down on the guy's kneecap.

The scream didn't come right away.

But when it did, it echoed.

Xero leaned in close, whispering something in Russian.

Low. Intimate. Wrong.

The guy flinched like he'd been touched by a ghost.

Kale spun the wrench. "Where's the girl?"

No answer.

Xero pressed a stim patch to the guy's chest.

"Wake up. You don't get to die yet."

The guy shuddered, breathing ragged. "You don't... know what you're dealing with."

"We don't care." Kale said. "Where. Is. She."

Xero crouched.

"Answer," he said. "Or I take your voice first."

The assassin cracked.

“They moved her... Sector 9E. Arcology Sub-Level Delta. Experimental lab complex. Verogon keeps the failures there. The ones they’re scared of.”

He coughed blood.

Spat a tooth.

“They think she’s a gate. Something left over from Delphi. She’s not... she’s not human anymore.”

Xero’s eyes went dark.

“She’s mine.”

Kale leaned in. “Wrong answer, dickhole.”

Xero stopped him.

“No. He’s done.”

Kale raised the wrench anyway.

“...Not for me.”

Outside the war room, Michael lit a smoke and said,

“I’m not gonna ask what I heard in there.”

Cash replied, “I already deleted the cameras.”

Ten minutes later, the door opened.

Xero stepped out first.

No blood on his hands.

But Kale?

Covered.

Grinning like he just won a trophy made of bone.

“We got an address,” he said.

Xero looked at Cash.

“Get us in.”

I woke up with a bad taste in my mouth and less dignity than a blackout mugshot.

No clothes.

No lights.

No warmth.

Just a cold chain bolted to the floor.

And a collar around my neck that buzzed every time I tried to move.

The room was concrete.

Walls like coffin guts.

Smelled like sanitized failure.

I wasn't dead.

But I sure as hell wasn't free.

My first instinct was scream.

But I didn't.

Because someone might hear.

And whoever set this up?

They weren't the rescue type.

I sat up slow.

The collar pulled back.

Too tight.

Cool metal against bruised skin.

My hair stuck to my face like I'd been tranq-sweating for hours.

There was no camera.

But I could feel eyes.

Shard was hot.

Real hot.

Like it was waiting for something.

"Not now," I whispered to it.

Yeah.

I talk to it now.

Sue me.

The floor had no cracks.

No bugs.

No drain.

They didn't expect me to eat, shit, or bleed.

Which meant this place wasn't made to keep me alive.

It was made to hold me long enough for whatever came next.

And something was coming.

I could feel it.

I closed my eyes.

Not to rest.

Just to picture Xero's face.

Cash's voice.

Michael cussing about eggs.

Kale screaming at a ceiling fan.

Ricardo dancing like an idiot.

Trent snoring in a hallway closet.

The Goonz.

My idiots.

They were coming.

They had to be.

Because if they weren't?

Then this place was gonna learn real quick what it meant to chain up a rabid dog with glitter lipstick and abandonment issues.

The shard buzzed again.

I smiled.

"Yeah," I whispered.

"Let's kill somebody together."

The hall outside was dead silent.

Then... humming.

High, off-key.

Children's song?

Twisted.

Wrong.

Then the voice:

"Knock knock knock... what's behind the bitchy box?"

Metal boots scraped the floor.

Not marching—skipping.

My stomach knotted.

The door hissed.

Slid open.

And in walked a man built like a nightmare that had no off switch.

Tall. Broad. Shirtless.

Tattoos everywhere.

Across his ribs:

“GOD DON’T WATCH THIS PART.”

He smiled like a sex crime with teeth.

Eyes way too happy.

“Oooohhh,” he breathed, stepping inside.

He sniffed.

Laughed.

“You’re warmer than I thought.”

He crouched low—too close.

I couldn’t move far.

The collar yanked me short.

His fingers tapped the floor next to my thigh.

Then he brushed a strand of hair off my face.

His touch wasn’t violent.

That would’ve been honest.

This was cruel in slow motion.

“You’re smaller than I remember,” he said.

“I don’t remember you at all,” I spat.

He leaned in.

Nose to my temple.

“But I remember you.”

His hand trailed across my shoulder.
Stopped at my collarbone.
Then grazing—
Over my breasts
Then where the shard throbbed beneath the skin.
He didn't press.
He just feeling.
Like he was waiting to be invited in.
"Is it in there?" he whispered.
"I'll let you pull it out after dinner."
I tried to sound smug.
But my voice cracked.
He grinned wider.
That made it worse.
"Dinner's optional," he said.
Then looked me up and down with no filter.
His fingers trailed lower.
Ribs.
Hipbone.
Just reaching down to my—
A voice snapped from the ceiling:
"K9. Cease physical contact. Now."
The air shifted.
Like the room had sucked in its breath.
He froze.

Then stood up too fast.
Twitched his neck.
“Boooo,” he hissed. “You’re no fun.”
He turned to leave.
Paused.
Looked back at me with that game show host smile.
“You’ll miss me when I’m ripping you open.”
And then he was gone.
I didn’t breathe for a minute.
The collar hummed.
The shard whispered something hot and angry.
I whispered back:
“Next time he touches me... we kill him slow.”

Put The Sick Dog Down

The war room was lit like a rave for hackers and felons.
Cash’s monitors flickered with grids, heatmaps, floorplans, and death potential.
A huge wireframe of the Verogon Arcology rotated slowly in the center screen.
Underneath?
Four words blinking red:
SUB-LEVEL DELTA. HOLDING BAY 09.
Ricardo leaned in.
“That’s where she is?”

Cash nodded. "That's where they're keeping her. You don't spend this much encryption on parking tickets."

Michael cracked his knuckles. "What's the fastest way down?"

Cash smirked.

"Through the wrong way."

Kale paced.

Barefoot. Shirtless. Already bruised.

"We go in noisy. We got the firepower. Crawl in through their ears, come out their wallets."

Trent raised a finger. "Hey uh, question. Just theoretical. If we go in loud, and I accidentally die..."

"Good," Kale said.

"Hell yeah," Cash added.

Michael pointed to an access shaft marked MAINTENANCE W5.

"We drop in from the garbage channel here. Skirt security. Split teams."

Cash: "I'll cut surveillance. Ricardo and I will loop the feed, spoof guard tags, jam drones."

Ricardo: "Also, can I wear a disguise? Like sexy janitor?"

"NO," everyone said.

Kale slammed his fist on the table. "And when we get to her?"

Xero, who hadn't spoken in ten minutes, finally looked up.

Voice low. Calm. Controlled.

"I get to K9."

Michael met his eyes.

Didn't flinch.

"You want him that bad?"

“I want him to know it’s me,” Xero said.

“And I want him to scream when he realizes it.”

Cash glanced back at the map.

“ETA to drop is four hours. You’ve got time to suit up, pre-load, say your goodbyes.”

Xero stood.

“No goodbyes.”

Then, quieter:

“Just promises.”

The van was quiet.

Kale loaded his shotgun with a level of care that made it feel like a religious ritual.

Michael stared at the back doors like he was already killing somebody in his head.

Ricardo was humming the Jaws theme but stopped halfway through and muttered,

“Shit, now I spooked myself.”

Cash’s voice buzzed in their comms:

“Doors open in 90 seconds. You’ll land inside Maintenance Shaft W5—old garbage duct. Supposedly decommissioned.”

“Supposedly?” Trent whispered.

Cash ignored him.

“I’ll jam security for a six-minute window. After that? You’re on your own until I ghost their central node. That’s ten floors down.”

Kale: “That’s a lotta floors between us and her.”

Michael: “Then we better make them regret every one.”

Xero sat in the back, tightening the straps on his gear.

Blade across his lap.

Pistol at his thigh.

He hadn't spoken since they left the House.

He just looked at the floor like it might say Karyna's name.

Then finally, just before the doors slid open, he muttered,

"...He's already touched her. I felt it."

Kale froze.

Michael said nothing.

Xero looked up.

"This isn't a rescue."

"This is an execution."

Doors hissed.

The duct yawned open beneath them.

Stale air.

Steel.

No turning back.

They dropped in one by one.

Boots on metal.

Guns drawn.

The Looney Goonz disappeared into the dark throat of Verogon.

No one screamed.

Not yet.

Sub-Level 1

The guard blinked.

Saw a janitor cart.

Then Kale's fist broke his nose through the visor.

Ricardo shoved a flashbang down the hallway.

It detonated with a wet pop and three screams.

Michael surged ahead, carving through body armor like origami.

Xero didn't run.

He walked.

And still somehow arrived first.

Sub-Level 2

They triggered a failsafe drone wall.

Cash screamed in their comms:

"TURN LEFT—NO, THE OTHER LEFT—SOMEONE PISS ON THE PANEL!"

Ricardo did.

It worked.

Trent accidentally shot out the lights.

"Whoops," he whispered, stepping over a corpse.

Sub-Level 3

A guard begged for his life.

Michael shot him twice anyway.

Kale: "Nice. That was almost polite."

Somewhere Higher

Monitors buzzed.

K9 leaned back in a chair designed for no one to sit in.

Feet on the console.

Cheeto dust on his chest.

He chewed slowly.

Watched camera feeds like porn.

“They’re fun. Loud. Dirty. Like me.”

A handler behind him murmured:

“They’re three floors out from 09.”

K9 didn’t look away.

“Good.”

He leaned forward.

Zoomed in on Xero.

Tapped the screen with one dirty finger.

“This one hurts. I like him.”

Sub-Level 5

Xero found a dog tag.

Still warm.

Scorched.

It read: ANDRE, Z.

PROPERTY OF VEROGON.

He pocketed it.

Didn’t tell the others.

Sub-Level 6

Ricardo took a grazing shot to the side.

“Ah! Is it serious?!”

Kale: “If by serious you mean not even close, yeah, totally fatal.”

Sub-Level 7

An emergency bulkhead dropped.

Cash couldn't override.

So Michael blew it open with two bricks of stolen plastique and a bottle of whiskey as ignition.

The fireball lit up Xero's face.

No smile.

Just focus.

"Next level's hers," Cash said in their ears.

Kale loaded a fresh mag and cracked his neck.

"Let's kill a fucking legend."

The elevator dropped too fast.

Ricardo puked into his mask.

"Why did I wear this..."

The doors opened.

Silence.

Not the calm kind.

The trap kind.

Michael stepped out first.

Floors gleamed wet.

Walls stained with old failures and newer blood.

Flickering signs on the wall read:

OBJECT 07 - OFFLINE

OBJECT 08 - TERMINATED

OBJECT 09 - ACTIVE

Xero read it.

Didn't blink.

Cash buzzed in:

“I’m trying to override local systems but this level’s dirty. It’s got AI spillover, mutated firmware, trash code running its own party.”

“Speak English,” Kale grunted.

“You’re walking into a haunted garbage disposal.”

Suddenly—

CLANG.

Every door along the corridor slid open.

Inside?

Not guards.

Not soldiers.

But things.

Clawed. Crooked. Half-metal.

Half-something else.

Trent: “Those aren’t people.”

Ricardo: “They got three elbows. That ain’t OSHA compliant.”

The things didn’t roar.

They chittered.

Clicked.

Then charged.

Michael opened fire.

The hallway erupted in smoke and screams.

Kale tackled one, shoved a grenade into its jaw, and dropkicked it into its siblings.

Ricardo screamed, “I DON’T EVEN HAVE A GUN, WHO GAVE ME TWO KNIVES?!”

Trent: “Run toward the blood! I think that means we’re winning!”

Xero didn't run.

He moved through the chaos like water.

Didn't stop.

Didn't shoot.

He only had one direction:

Straight toward Object 09.

The shard in his chest was pulsing now.

Tighter.

Faster.

He felt me.

I was close.

So was he.

Behind him, Ricardo tripped over a crawling mutant and drop-kicked it with sheer panic.

Michael decapitated another with a table leg.

Kale impaled a beast on a severed security bot and laughed, "I'M GONNA NEED MORE HAND SANITIZER AFTER THIS!"

Cash's voice in their ears:

"You're close! Karyna's cell is redlined! Her vitals are spiking! She knows you're near!"

Xero broke into a run.

Turned the corner—

And saw the cell.

Door sealed.

One glass panel.

Inside?
Me?
On my knees.
Collar blinking.
Eyes wide.
I saw him.
And smiled.
“Took you long enough, devotchka,” he whispered.
He came through the smoke.
Eyes locked.
Mouth set.
“Xero,” I breathed.
But the collar squeezed.
Hard.
I couldn’t speak again.
Just gasped.
Felt my vision sparkle.
He ran straight to the glass.
Didn’t hesitate.
Just punched the panel with his blade’s hilt until cracks spiderwebbed like fear.
Behind him, screaming and gunfire filled the hall.
He didn’t even look back.
Only at me.
And I saw it—
Not rage.
Terror.

Like he was afraid he was too late.

“Open the damn door!” Michael’s voice from behind.

“We got crawlies regrouping!”

“Cash can’t breach it,” Xero snapped.

I clawed at my collar.

No give.

It burned.

The shard in my gut flared.

Hot.

Angry.

Alive.

Xero dropped to his knees in front of me.

Both hands on the collar.

Whispered:

“Stay. With. Me.”

The metal creaked.

Cracked.

Then light surged from my chest.

A pulse of pink-white fire.

The collar shattered.

Right off me.

I fell into him.

Coughing.

Sweating.

But breathing.

He held me like he was trying to keep me in one piece.

And whispered:

“I’ll never be too late again.”

The hallway fell quiet.

Too quiet.

Even Ricardo stopped swearing.

Kale’s voice came low over comms:

“...Xero. He’s here.”

Xero didn’t let go of me.

He stood.

Turned.

And K9 stepped into view.

Still shirtless.

Still smiling.

Clapping slowly.

“Ohhhh, look at you two. The sentimental little battery pack found her boyfriend.”

He didn’t have a gun.

He didn’t need one.

He had a body built to ruin.

He grinned wider.

“Ready to bleed for her, pretty boy?”

Xero didn’t answer.

Just handed me a pistol.

And stepped forward.

I couldn’t move yet.

Not fast.

But I watched.

Watched Xero move like a shadow with rage stitched to his spine.

Watched K9—taller, heavier, built like a riot squad—step in like a gladiator.

He wasn't laughing anymore.

He charged.

Xero sidestepped, cut low—

Blade kissed thigh.

K9 grunted.

Grabbed him by the neck.

Threw him through a table.

I screamed his name—

But he rolled with it.

Came up slicing.

Blood hit the floor.

Not mine.

Not yet.

K9 swung wide.

Xero ducked, cut deep across his ribs—

Then took a fist to the side of the face that cracked something.

Xero went down.

K9 was on him in a blink.

Fists raining.

“You think love makes you strong?” he hissed.

“I live in the part where love dies.”

Xero’s blade clattered.

Out of reach.

I crawled.

Dragged myself across the cell.

Got to the pistol.

Raised it—

But my hand shook too hard.

K9 saw me.

Smiled again.

Started to stand.

But Xero bit him.

Right on the forearm.

Tore skin and nerve.

Used the moment to slam a knee up into his gut—

Then jammed two fingers into an old wound.

K9 howled.

Xero roared back.

Grabbed his blade from the floor—

And plunged it into K9’s shoulder.

They crashed into the wall.

Blood sprayed.

Then K9 caught him.

One hand.
Lifted Xero by the throat.
Eyes wild.
Mouth smiling through blood.
“She’s not yours,” he whispered.
“She never was.”

I raised the gun.
I fired.
Twice.
The first shot hit K9 in the throat.
The second in the jaw.
He stumbled.
Dropped Xero.
Didn’t fall.
But knelt.
Like he didn’t want to.
Then collapsed.
Hard.
Face down.
Bleeding too much to fix.

Xero didn’t say anything.
He just stood there, swaying,
Looking at the corpse.
Then at me.

I crawled into his arms.
He held me like the world had ended.
And he was okay with that as long as I was still in it.
Outside, through the open door—
I heard Kale yelling.
Michael reloading.
Ricardo probably doing something flamingly stupid.
But inside this room?
It was just us.

Exit Wound

The alarm lights turned white.
I didn't even know white was a danger color.
But here it was.
Flashing like the ceiling had opinions.
Michael's voice in the comms:
"Elevator's three halls down. Five minutes or we're dead—pick one!"
Xero helped me walk.
No words.
His grip was tight.
My feet bare, wet with blood and who-knew-what.
Kale and Trent took point.

Shooting anything with too many eyes or the wrong badge.

Ricardo showed up, panting.

“You okay?” he asked, looking at me like I was half-ghost.

I nodded.

Then fainted onto him.

He caught me.

Swore a little.

Cradled me like a baby and bolted.

“DEAD GIRL COMIN’ THROUGH!” he yelled.

Kale: “She’s not dead.”

Ricardo: “SHE’S COMMITTING TO THE BIT!”

Behind us, Xero stopped.

Looked back at K9’s body.

Then lit a charge grenade from his belt.

Dropped it onto the corpse.

Walked away without watching it erupt into flame.

We hit the elevator.

Cash’s voice crackled:

“I’ve got you for thirty more seconds before the override eats itself. GO.”

Doors shut.

The lift rose.

I was lying across Ricardo’s lap.

Kale looked like he'd been dipped in ketchup.

Michael had two pistols and no patience.

Trent was crying into a stolen energy drink.

And Xero?

Xero was staring at nothing.

But holding my hand like it was the last part of the world worth touching.

We came out under a bridge.

Half-collapsed.

Smelled like oil, rot, and maybe a little dead raccoon.

Ricardo tripped over the first rail.

"Ow. I just got healed and now I'm re-broken."

Kale crawled out last, flopped onto the ground like a dying actor and muttered,

"Someone please run me over. I deserve it."

Cash was waiting.

In the most garbage van in the city.

Side door open.

Engine already hot.

He tossed everyone prepaid burner IDs, fake faces, and electrolyte drinks.

Trent: "This one says I'm a yoga instructor."

Cash: "You wish you were that flexible."

Michael climbed into the front.

Gun still in hand.

"Who knows?"

Cash didn't even look.

"Everyone."

He flipped on the windshield HUD.

Every screen flashed with their faces.

Looney Goonz.

Names.

Bounties.

My pic was marked “HIGH PRIORITY - PROJECT RECLAMATION.”

My stomach twisted.

“Verogon just broke the rules,” Cash said.

“Backroom bribes. Security contracts. Open mercenary recruitment. They’re not hiding it.”

Xero spoke—first words since the fire.

“Let them come.”

The House of Hoodlums was waiting.

Still standing.

Barely.

Inside?

Ricardo passed out on the couch.

Trent took a celebratory bath in someone else’s soda.

Kale opened a beer with a machete.

And me?

I let Xero carry me to bed.

No words.

Just warmth and silence.

—

But before I passed out, I heard it.

Cash's voice from the war room:

"They put a million creds on our heads."

"Each."

Michael: "That all?"

Kale: "I was hoping for two."

Everything had changed.

And outside?

Tulsa buzzed like a shark tank full of knives.

The sheets were warm.

But not warmer than him.

Xero lay on his back, shirtless, breathing slow.

Eyes open.

One arm around my waist, keeping me pressed to his side.

I had my head on his chest.

Could hear every heartbeat.

Could feel them in mine.

Neither of us spoke.

Not for a long time.

Outside the door, the Goonz were still alive.

Kale yelling at a broken toaster.

Michael and Cash arguing about which wrestler could beat up a velociraptor.

Ricardo laughing like someone who'd earned it.

Trent loudly brushing his teeth in the hallway closet.

I closed my eyes and said, "We should join them."

Xero didn't move.

"Later."

"Yeah," I whispered. "Later."

He rubbed slow circles against my back with his thumb.

I tilted my head up.

Saw him staring at the ceiling like it might say something better than what he was trying to find.

Then he spoke.

Voice low.

Rough.

Like it cost him something.

"Karyna."

I blinked.

"Yeah?"

He turned his head toward me.

Eyes sharp, but softened somehow.

"I love you."

My heart didn't skip.

It leapt.

Because the way he said it?

Like it hurt.

Like it was dangerous.

Like he'd never said it out loud before.

I smiled.

Pressed a kiss to his chest.

Then met his eyes.

“I love you too.”

“Have for a while.”

He pulled me closer.

Not hard.

Not desperate.

Just tight enough to know he never wanted to let go again.

I pressed my cheek against his shoulder.

And whispered:

“You scare the shit outta me, you know.”

He grinned.

“Good.”

We lay there, curled into each other.

No past.

No bounty.

No Verogon.

Just a girl with pink light in her chest and a boy who’d follow it anywhere.

I Am Xero

I don't sleep like she does.

She sleeps with her mouth a little open.

Hand curled under her cheek.

Sometimes she twitches—like she's chasing something just out of reach.

I keep my hand on her back.

Not holding.

Just... touching.

So I know she's still here.

The bed is too warm.

The House is too quiet.

And my thoughts are too loud.

I stare at the ceiling and think about:

- The look in her eyes when I pulled the collar off.
- The way K9 bled and didn't scream until I made him.
- The moment I told her I loved her and she didn't flinch.

I think about how dangerous that is.

To love someone like that.

To love her.

I could've stayed in the blacksite.

Could've rotted in a lab, a jail, a machine.

But I followed a signal.

Pink light in the dark.

Eyes like forgiveness before it's earned.

The first time I saw her, she was beating a vending machine with a broken pipe.

And calling it names that weren't even real words.

She looked like trouble.

She looked like home.

The shard hums low in my chest.

It's not pain.

Not quite.

It's proximity.

Like something under the skin is listening.

Like the signal between us isn't just shared.

It's blending.

"Xero."

The voice isn't hers.

It's mine.

Echoing. Wrong. Distant.

"Protocol remains incomplete. Synchronization: 57%."

I sit up.

Karyna doesn't wake.

The pink glow from her abdomen pulses in time with mine.

We're linked. But not finished.

Whatever they put in us—

It's still talking.

And I don't know who else is listening.

I lean back down.

Press my forehead to hers.

Whisper:

"Not tonight."

And wait for dawn.

She was already awake when I opened my eyes.

Not moving.

Just... laying there.

Head on my chest.

Blanket pulled halfway to her chin.

Eyes flicking lazily across her phone screen.

It made soft clicky sounds.

Like static wrapped in sugar.

"You've been watching that the whole time?" I murmured.

She grinned, still scrolling.

"No, I watched you sleep for like twenty minutes first. Then I got bored. Now I'm watching this girl teach a robot dog to twerk."

She held it up.

The robot was twerking.

I blinked.

"Why."

“It’s got real-world applications, Xero. Don’t stifle innovation.”

She curled up tighter against me.

I let her.

Warmth settled over me like smoke.

“You hungry?” she whispered.

“Are you.”

She kissed my chest.

“Come on. I made a plan. Pajamas. Toast. Judging people from across the room. Classic.”

We got dressed.

Or close enough.

I wore ratty joggers and an old tank top with a long-dead band logo.

She wore cotton shorts and a pastel shirt that said “RABBIT CHURCH” in glittery pink.

She tied her hair into a dreadlocky ponytail and looked like an anime character on day six of a hostage situation.

The House was weirdly quiet.

Then:

“NO, NO, THE COCKPIT GOES THERE, YOU ABSOLUTE WASTE OF OXYGEN!”

Kale was in the common room, surrounded by spilled LEGOs like a man building a spaceship out of childhood trauma.

Michael sat cross-legged next to him, sipping orange soda out of a dog bowl.

“I’m **helping**,” he said, not helping.

Kale threw a small blue piece at his head.

“You’re sabotaging art.”

Karyna nudged me, grinning.

“Go help your boyfriend before he starts crying again.”

I walked over.

Looked down at the half-assembled monstrosity.

“Gallaxia V-Prime,” I said. “From Star Hazard: Megafire.”

Kale looked up, blinking.

“Wait, you’ve seen that?”

I shrugged.

“Had the bootleg tapes. Watched ‘em on a screen the size of my hand.”

He stared at me.

Then at the model.

Then back at me.

“So... do you wanna do the engine core? I keep screwing up the symmetry.”

Ten minutes later we were both hunched over the pieces.

Michael wandered off to talk to a can of chili.

Karyna worked in the kitchen, humming like static with rhythm.

It felt...

Easy.

And wrong, somehow.

Too safe.

Then Cash’s voice exploded from the hallway:

“EVERYONE NEEDS TO GET IN THE WAR ROOM RIGHT NOW.”

“Like, RIGHT. NOW.”

And just like that—

The soft part of morning snapped.

And the real world punched back in.

War

I was still licking peanut butter off my fingers when everything died.

The hallway lit up red.

Cash's voice came through like a fire drill that knew your name.

I followed the others barefoot.

War room smelled like coffee, ozone, and panic sweat.

Cash was already mid-sprint through four screens worth of hell.

"This was 6:23AM. East sector. Old Route 5. Boom. Guttled."

"This—6:30. North warehouse. People we paid to be invisible."

"And this one? That's Monty."

Monty was... was.

The screen played the clip again.

He ran.

They dragged him out the window like he weighed nothing.

Kale sat down, real slow.

Didn't say a word.

Xero didn't move at all.

"What the fuck is this," I whispered.

Cash looked at me.

Didn't blink.

"This is a purge."

"Verogon's cleaning house. And we're the last messy room left."

Michael leaned against the wall, drinking from his chili can like it was a wine glass.

"So... all our backup's dead?"

"Half."

"So... we're screwed."

"Not yet. But the walls are definitely sweating."

I looked at the last screen.

A list of names.

All crossed out.

Except ours.

"Are we the only ones left?" I asked.

Cash didn't answer.

Xero stepped forward.

Voice like a gun half-cocked.

"What do they want?"

Cash pulled up a separate feed.

Zoomed in on the Verogon task force leader's comms log.

Just one phrase:

"Secure the asset. Do not kill. Synchronization must complete."

Everyone looked at me.

I wiped my hands on my pajama shirt.

Suddenly very aware of my lack of bra.

“Y’all could’ve let me finish my toast first.”

Nobody laughed.

Michael’s the first one to say what we’re all thinking.

“We need to fuck ‘em up fast and fuckier than they expect.”

Cash nods slowly, chewing on a plastic stir stick like it owes him money.

“Can’t outspend ‘em. Can’t out-arm ‘em. So we out-chaos.”

We’re crowded in the war room basement.

Smells like gun oil, socks, and a raccoon might be living in the duct.

I’m on the table.

Literally.

Sitting criss-cross in my stupid bunny socks.

Coffee mug cradled between both hands.

Kale’s pacing with a crowbar for no reason.

Ricardo has a sandwich he definitely didn’t make, actually I think that was mine, what the fuck.

Cash slaps a diagram up.

“This is the Verogon cache house. Near the South Ring highway.

- Full of gear.
- Heavily guarded.
- But not reinforced.

We hit it.

We steal the feed and broadcast them getting their asses handed to them.

Middle of the night. Prime-time humiliation.”

Michael raises a hand.

“Can we call it Middle Finger Midnight.”

Cash points at him.

“That’s the exact energy.”

But Xero—

Xero hasn’t said anything.

He’s just looking at me.

Then he finally speaks.

“We need to split.”

The room goes quiet.

“They want her. Not us. If we’re separate, we divide their focus.”

I blink.

“You want me to leave?”

“Not leave. Draw. Just until the strike’s done.”

Kale snorts.

“Yeah. Sure. Let’s send the shard girl and the sad sword guy off alone while the adults blow shit up.”

Ricardo: “You’re just mad ‘cause you wanted a road trip.”

Kale: “I’m mad ‘cause they’re not even wearing pants.”

I look at Xero.

He’s calm.

Too calm.

But I feel it.

The little shimmer in the pink light.

The way my stomach flutters wrong when I look at him.

Like the shard agrees.

Like it wants to go.

I nod.

“Fine. I’ll pack snacks.”

We are officially inside the world’s crustiest panic room.

Peeling lead paint.

Rusty shelves stacked with food cubes that expired before I was born.

And what may or may not be a mummified raccoon in the corner.

“I give this place a solid two out of ten. Ambience: bunker chic. Scent profile: mildew and depression.”

Xero lays his bag down like he’s done this a thousand times.

“You’ve been in worse.”

“Excuse me, I’m evolving. I don’t slum. I survive with style.”

He looks at me.

Smiles.

It’s small.

But it hurts me a little every time he does it.

Because he doesn’t know he’s doing it.

I sit cross-legged on a stack of broken textbooks.

Pull out a snack bar from my coat pocket.

“You want the good half?”

“Which half is the good half?”

I snap it in two.

Hand him the shorter one.

“Mine tastes like loyalty.”

We eat in silence for a bit.

Not bad.

Chewy.

Probably made of recycled vinyl flooring.

Then Xero pulls out the blanket.

Singular.

“You brought one blanket.”

“You said pack light.”

“Yeah, light like no grappling hook, not no extra blanket you lizard.”

He shrugs.

“We’ll share.”

My brain short circuits slightly.

But I play it cool.

“Ugh. Fine. But if you turn into a heater gremlin I’m pushing you off the cot.”

“Fair. If you snore, I put bugs in your hair.”

“I hope you try. I train spiders. I know their true names.”

He blinks.

“...You’re the scariest person I’ve ever been in love with.”

I smile.

“Good.”

We lie down.

The cot’s way too small.

Our limbs are overlapping like tangled headphones.

“This is weird,” I whisper.

“You’re weird.”

I rest my head against his chest.

His heartbeat’s steady.

“Do you think the others are okay?”

“Michael’s fine. Kale’s probably monologuing. Trent’s probably yelling at his reflection.”

“Cash?”

“Using a drone to spy on the club down the block.”

I sigh.

“God, I miss them.”

“I know.”

A pause.

Then I look up at him.

“Are you scared?”

“...Yes.”

“Same.”

I kiss the underside of his jaw.

Soft.

Quick.

He doesn’t say anything.

But he holds me tighter.

The bunker's quiet.

But the glow between us still pulses.

Still waiting.

[Cash's Log]

[Middle Finger Midnight]

[Location: Roof of Brenda's Burnt Butter Bakery]

[Cash | 10:46PM | Snacking on expired sour gummies]

I got four drones in the sky, one bottle of stolen gin in my bag, and zero confidence in what's about to happen.

"Drone One confirms six guards outside the cache house. Light armor. Medium dicks."

"Drone Two sees the back alley's clear but smells like piss and fireworks."

"Drone Three is watching a girl get proposed to in front of Club Metro... she said no. Brutal."

I pop a gummy.

Adjust the zoom.

Michael chimes in from the comms van.

"Hey Cash. Hypothetically... if I played Britney Spears during the shootout, would that be a war crime?"

"Only if it's 'Perfume.'"

"Damn. That was my go-to."

[Meanwhile: Kale, crouched behind a dumpster, doing what he calls "battle meditation."]

"Tonight," he whispers, "I become legend. I become flame."

"Verogon will tremble. The city will whisper my name like a curse and a prayer."

"I am wrath incarnate in tactical cargo pants."

Michael: “Yo, is Kale monologuing again?”

Cash: “He’s always monologuing.”

[Meanwhile: Trent, shirtless, flexing in the side mirror of the getaway car]

“You ready? You ready? I’m gonna stab time.”

He points at his reflection.

“You think you’re better than me? Huh? You think you can out-Trent me? I invented me. You discount-ass funhouse-bitch-”

Cash: “Trent’s losing the mirror battle. I repeat. Mirror’s winning.”

I guide the drones closer.

Guards are getting twitchy.

Someone knows something’s coming.

But not who.

Not when.

Not us.

“Alright, kids,” I say into the mic.

“Game time. Britney locked and loaded.”

“Let’s paint the sky with Verogon tears.”

“We’re live in 3...”

“2...”

“Fuck it, we’re live now.”

[DRONE CAM: STREAM TITLE - “Middle Finger Midnight: Ep. 1 - Sponsored by Regret”]

Michael dances out of the back of the van in a flamingo pink hoodie, blasting Britney Spears at full volume.

He cartwheels across the parking lot with dual pistols like some cracked-out cowboy mime.

“It’s Michael, bitch.”

Two guards don’t even raise their guns in time.

He shoots them in the kneecaps.

Then throws a slice of bologna on one’s chest.

“Tag. You’re lunch.”

Kale vaults the fence like a firework in cargo pants.

Sword in one hand.

Shotgun in the other.

He dropkicks a guard through a window screaming:

“THIS IS FOR MISSING PROM, YOU BASTARDS!”

Inside the cache house, he kicks open a supply closet, guns blazing.

“I AM KALE! WITNESS ME, YOU DATA-FARMING CAPITALIST PISSGOBLINS!”

Cash over comms:

“Tone it down just a hair, Mad Max.”

“NEVER!”

Trent comes in late.

Shirtless.

Greased up.

Holding two throwing axes and a jar of pickles.

“WHO ORDERED THE DISAPPOINTMENT SPECIAL?!”

He hurls the pickles at a security camera.

“CATCH THIS, YOU CORPORATE CLOWNS!”

A guard tries to shoot him.

Trent uses a trash can lid as a shield and screams the entire time.

Cash over comms:

“Trent, you’re off-script.”

“I WAS BORN OFF-SCRIPT, BITCH!”

Back on the roof, I switch drone angles like a TV director on meth.

The stream is up to 4,200 viewers.

The chat is on fire:

- “Yo is that the Sword Dude from the gas station fight???”
- “Free the Goonz!!”
- “LOONEY GOONZ FOR MAYOR!!”

I switch to slow motion just as Kale roundhouse kicks a guard into a printer.

“And that’s a wrap on fiscal reporting.”

The building is ours.

We torch the servers.

We take the cache.

We moon the cameras.

And we leave nothing but a signature.

Spray-painted on the wall in Michael’s handwriting:

“TELL DWIGHT WE’RE COMING.

- THE LOONEY GOONZ”

Heat Signature

I woke up to Xero's heartbeat.

His chest under my cheek.

Blanket tangled around my thighs.

Air smelled like stale chips, blanket musk, and his skin.

Cozy.

Gross.

Perfect.

My phone buzzed against the floor.

And kept buzzing.

[44 new messages: "GET UP GET UP GET UP" — Cash]

I groaned.

Rolled off the cot like a raccoon falling out of a tree.

Landed hard.

Xero didn't move.

"Why are you vibrating," I muttered at the screen.

Unlocked it.

Froze.

Trending page lit up like a firework made of crimes.

- #LOONEYGODZ
- #KaleCutAWindowGuy
- #MichaelDidTheSplitJump
- #MiddleFingerMidnight

There were GIFs.

Fan edits.

Someone made merch.

Someone made fan fiction.

“Xero...”

He mumbled something about the blanket being sentient.

“Babe. We went viral.”

He cracked one eye open.

“Like... flu viral? Or internet viral?”

“Both, maybe.”

Cash’s last message:

“Verogon’s prepping retaliation. Two precincts just got paid off. Every gang boss in a six-mile radius wants a piece of us. Stay underground.”

“We’re famous,” I muttered.

“We’re doomed,” Xero replied, sitting up and reaching for his pants.

I stood up.

Turned slowly.

Looked at the old concrete walls of the shelter.

The flickering lightbulb.

Our crumpled snack wrappers.

His t-shirt on the floor.

“We need... a plan.”

“No. First we need coffee. Then we need a plan.”

He tossed me my hoodie.

“Also your shirt’s inside out again.”

“It’s a style choice.”

“It’s backward. The tag’s choking you.”

“I like pain.”

We dressed.

Packed.

Stole another expired granola bar.

And stepped out of the bunker into a world that suddenly knew our names.

They won’t touch us here,” Ricardo said, dragging four plastic chairs toward the booth like he was furnishing a panic room.

“This place is untouchable. You don’t mess with the arches. Verogon’s not that stupid.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“You think a multibillion-dollar corporate hit squad would spare us because we’re in a McDonald’s?”

“Exactly.”

We were packed into the corner booth like a post-apocalyptic breakfast club.

Ricardo was gnawing on a Sausage McGriddle like it contained answers.

Kale was stirring his iced coffee with a straw and muttering about how “this is where Caesar met Brutus.”

Michael was balancing a hash brown on his nose.

Trent was trying to barter his socks for someone’s milkshake.

“I NEED THE CALCIUM.”

Cash looked at me over his McCafe.

“You’re the face now, by the way. You. Not Kale. Not Michael. You.”

“Why me?”

“Because your mug’s everywhere. The ‘Goonz Girl with the Glow.’ They got your shard on TikCok loops. You’re the narrative.”

“Oh good. I love being a narrative.”

Xero leaned back in his seat, arms crossed, eyes half-closed.

“We need to split again. Change patterns. Ditch gear. Burn old safehouses.”

“Maybe rebrand while we’re at it,” Cash added.

“Go from ‘Looney Goonz’ to, like... Normal Law-Abiding Book Club.”

Michael:

“Ooo. Or Goonz 2.0: Revenge of the McMuffin.”

Kale finally snapped his straw.

“No. We escalate. We turn the myth into legend. We strike harder, louder, bigger. We make a city remember.”

“Bro,” said Michael, chewing, “You are one monologue away from becoming a propaganda poster.”

I looked around the table.

They were all watching me now.

Even Trent, who was trying to drink ketchup from a straw but somehow made it look poignant.

“Alright,” I said.

“New plan: we get a burner place. We gear up quiet. And we start fighting back smart.”

“And then?”

“And then...” I took a deep breath.

“We rob Dwight Jonhower. In public. On camera. While wearing matching outfits.”

Ricardo raised his hash brown.

“To the clown.”

[Location: 51st St Safehouse - 11:42 AM]

Xero.

Me.

One bathroom.

And no insulation.

SLAM.

Click.

Muffled giggling.

Clothing ruffling.

And then...

“Oh no,” Michael whispered.

“Oh no no no—”

Then came the sounds.

Wet. Rhythmic. Unapologetic.

Ricardo dropped his grilled cheese like it had personally betrayed him.

“She’s like... my sister, bro. I braided her hair once.”

Cash was curled up on the floor next to the mini fridge, eyes wide, soul leaving his body.

“We’re in hell. We’re already dead. This is purgatory and that’s our punishment.”

Kale stood frozen in the doorway.

Eyes glazed.

Face red.

Hands balled into fists.

“I’m gonna jump through this wall and fight a mailbox.”

The moaning intensified.

Something banged against the sink.

A pipe hissed.

Water sprayed.

Michael turned the TV volume up.

“Let’s just blast infomercials. Drown it out. No one talk.”

Trent was eating Doritos with an eerie calm.

“This is beautiful. Let them love. Let them scream.”

“TRENT, SHUT THE F—”

“They are the thunder in the pipes, and we are merely the rats beneath the floor.”

Kale finally exploded.

“HE’S NOT EVEN THAT GOOD LOOKING—”

Cash tackled him into the couch.

Ricardo threw a pillow at the bathroom door like it was a grenade.

“CAN YOU NOT— IN THE SHOWER WE USE?!”

Michael began banging a spoon against a coffee cup in rhythm.

“LET’S HARMONIZE WITH THEM.”

“STOP. STOP TRYING TO MAKE IT A CHANT.”

Finally... silence.

The door creaked open.

I emerged in Xero's hoodie, hair a mess, smirking.

Xero followed behind me, silently picking a broken tile out of his shirt sleeve.

Nobody said anything.

Cash stood up, fixed his hat.

"Cool. Great. Thanks for that."

"We're burning this house. The whole house. Gasoline. Now."

[Cut to later: Cash typing furiously at a laptop, I'm sipping water like I didn't just ruin five people emotionally.]

"Alright," Cash said, clicking keys. "Verogon's throwing a fundraiser gala at the Avalon Luxe downtown next Friday. 500 heads. VIPs. Celebs. Dwight himself."

"And security?"

"Like federal penitentiary meets yacht club. But if we get in...? There's money, data, surveillance hardlines, and blackmail folders for days."

I stretched, still smug.

"Let's dress up. Steal everything. Look hot doing it."

Michael nodded.

"Heist in formalwear? I'm in."

Kale walked out onto the balcony and screamed silently into the void.

We were in another safehouse.

This one smelled like black mold, cat piss, and the 1970s.

Everyone was gathered around Cash's laptop like it was a war map.

And in a way, it was.

A blueprints overlay of the Avalon Luxe Hotel.

Security grid. Drone scans. Gala schedule.

The whole nine.

“Dwight’s gonna be there. Gala starts at 7, red carpet press coverage, live music, dumb politicians, maybe a senator,” Cash explained, clicking through layers.

“We get in, we make noise, we steal his private vault keycards and tank his PR.”

“Big stage. Big stakes.”

Michael raised a hand.

“Quick question: Will the bathroom be occupied this time?”

Ricardo flinched so hard he spilled Coke on his pants.

“Stop. Don’t. I just got the noises out of my soul.”

Cash didn’t even look up.

“I still hear the squish.”

Trent muttered,

“There was lube involved. I didn’t like knowing that.”

Kale stared at the wall with a thousand-yard glare.

“Guys,” I said. “It was one moment. In a separate room. With consenting adults. Let it go.”

Michael:

“You broke the water pressure. The toilet still hisses in pain.”

Ricardo:

“I peed in the kitchen sink yesterday because of you.”

Xero, quietly sipping coffee, shrugged.

“We had fun.”

Cash flinched like he’d been tasered.

Back to the mission.

“We’ll need disguises,” Cash continued.

“Fake invites. Gear stashed offsite. Someone’s gotta schmooze long enough to ID Jonhower’s bodyguards.”

“I call bartender disguise,” Michael said.

“I wanna be the guy who poisons the rich with vibes.”

“I’ll dress as rich trauma,” Trent added.

“Suit jacket. No pants.”

Kale mumbled something about a cloak and daggers ensemble. Still wouldn’t look at me.

“You okay, Kale?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” he said, absolutely not fine.

“Just visualizing bloodshed and cummerbunds.”

Cash printed out a gear list.

“We move in pairs. We exfil with hard drives, physical creds, and a piece of Jonhower’s ego.”

“Like a tooth?” Michael asked.

“Like a scandal folder.”

“But also maybe a tooth?”

We had a week.

One week to become fancy, invisible, and unfuckwithable.

And maybe buy a second toilet.

The tailor’s storefront looked like a crime scene married a vape shop.

The blinking neon sign just read:

“FITZ. No Questions.”

Inside: walls lined with broken mannequins, LED strips, and a wall-mounted shotgun labeled “Return Policy.”

A woman with LED lashes and no eyebrows waved us in.

“You want sexy corporate, political espionage, or gala warlock?”

“Gala warlock,” I said.

“Ooh, brave.”

Fitz herself appeared behind the curtain, looking like if Cruella De Vil had a head injury at Coachella.

“For you, honey?” she said, sizing me up. “We’re doing goddess hacker chic. Legs out. Blade-ready. Pink glow slit optional.”

“And for your tall drink of static cling over there?”

“I don’t need anything flashy,” Xero mumbled.

She stared at him for five full seconds.

“You drip melancholy. We’ll make it lethal. Come with me, sadness man.”

[Elsewhere - Uptown Boutique]

Kale & Trent: “The Velvet Daggers”

Trent was filming Kale on his burner phone as they entered a high-end menswear boutique.

“Say it again.”

“We’re here to curate violently opulent silhouettes for the death of capitalism.”

“Perfect.”

The store manager had a ponytail and a panic disorder.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“We are the appointment,” Kale said, sweeping in like he owned France.

Trent nodded.

“We’re being followed by an independent documentary crew from VICE++. Don’t spook them.”

[Back at Fitz’s]

I stepped out of the fitting stall.

My dress was short. Tight. Elegant. Shard cutout glowing at the abdomen.

Like I was the distraction and the payload.

“Damn,” Xero said, blinking.

“You too,” I said, eyeing his fit. All black. He looked like a stolen soul.

“We’re gonna steal the whole gala.”

[Meanwhile, at Uptown]

Kale was wearing a silver-stitched suit jacket with matching gloves, ranting about fashion as revolution.

“The red carpet is just a battlefield with camera flashes.”

Trent was in no shirt and a sheer floral robe.

The manager cried in the bathroom.

[End montage: the crew in various poses, fabrics, and filtered mirrors.]

Operation Dress to Oppress: initiated.

The living room lights were dimmed.

A traffic cone was turned upside down and labeled “CEREMONIAL GOON HAT.”

Cash held a lighter under his chin for dramatic lighting.

Michael had a cape made from a car floor mat.

Kale was pacing like this was a blood oath and not a glorified sleepover prank.

“Tonight,” Cash said solemnly, “we honor the Blade Man, the Sad Boy, the Stoic Freak who has bled with us, screamed with us, and listened to Karyna’s YouTube playlists without complaint.”

Michael:

“He even sat through that *Korean makeup review with the murder subplot.”

“Twice,” I added.

Cash pointed the lighter at Xero.

“By the powers invested in this traumatized hive of semi-professional war clowns, we offer you one final chance: do you accept full Goondom?”

Xero blinked once.

“Sure.”

Trent handed him a single peanut in a bottle cap.

“Symbol of strength.”

Michael gave him a used parking ticket.

“Symbol of injustice.”

Kale handed him a rusty wrench.

“Symbol of pain, but also versatility.”

Ricardo grinned and raised his drink.

“You’re already creampieing Karyna, might as well be part of us.”

The room froze.

Cash dropped the lighter.

Michael inhaled a bean.

Kale’s left eye twitched so hard it nearly became sentient.

Trent whispered, “Oh no.”

SPLAT.

A warm, still-wrapped burrito nailed Ricardo square in the face.

“WHAT THE HELL—”

“WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT—”

Cash stood up.

“YOU DON’T SAY THAT. EVER. OUT LOUD. AT ALL.”

Michael:

“You ruined the vibe. You tased the vibe.”

Ricardo wiped cheese off his eyebrow.

“I was being honest!”

Kale:

“Next time be honest with your therapist.”

Xero looked at me.

I looked at him.

We both tried not to laugh.

He popped the bottle cap peanut into his mouth and chewed slowly.

“Do I get a certificate?”

Michael handed him a receipt for chicken nuggets.

“Now you do.”

Cash clapped his hands.

“Alright. Ceremony’s over. Goonz up. We’ve got a gala to ruin.”

Gala Of The Damned

I’ve never worn a dress this tight before.

It shimmered when I moved.

Like liquid static.

Every step screamed money, violence, and don't touch me unless you're ready to bleed.

My shard glowed soft pink at the midriff slit, framed like jewelry.

It hummed as I walked.

Xero walked beside me, clean-shaven, sharp in all-black, calm as a midnight hitman at a wine tasting.

"We look ridiculous," I whispered.

"You look dangerous," he said.

"I look like your apology letter."

The Avalon Luxe was wall-to-wall marble and murder.

Cameras. Rich people. Holograms.

Fake laughter with teeth underneath.

Security drones hovered like slow flies.

Event staff moved like they'd rehearsed fear.

My fake ID said Veronica Petrovna, heiress to "PetroCore Mining."

My heels said I was not to be reasoned with.

Cash's voice in my ear buzzed.

"You're in. Cameras looped. Be pretty. Be loud. Don't touch shrimp tower until Ricardo gives the greenlight."

"Copy that," I said.

"Also Trent's robe is already a problem. I think he's pre-gaming in the koi pond."

I spotted Dwight Jonhower across the room—slick hair, fake tan, real smug.

He was schmoozing three senators and a man who might be a robot.

"Target sighted."

“Affirmative,” Xero murmured. “You want me to tail him?”

“Nope,” I smiled. “We’re doing this my way.”

I took his arm.

Walked us straight toward the VIP lounge like I owned it.

Behind us, a security guard froze mid-scan and whispered into his comm:

“Yeah. Yeah I’ve got him. The bald one. I think that’s Kale.”

Meanwhile in Kale’s internal insecurity...

Okay.

Breathe.

You’re wearing designer.

You’re in public.

You are a man of **wealth** and **subtle evil**.

I adjusted my cufflinks.

The guard was watching me too hard.

I could feel it like a hot wire down my spine.

I turned. Approached.

“Evening,” I said, voice low, precise. “Problem?”

“Name,” the guard said. “Now.”

“Dorian Blake. Oil futures. Backer of the New Coalition Reinvestment Act.”

“I’m here for the auction and the arson.”

“Sorry—art. Auction and art.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I know your face. You were in the sector raid last month.”

“Don’t be absurd. I was heliskiing in Uruguay. Ask my lawyer.”

I could feel it working.

The lies layering.

He was blinking. Processing.

And then—

Trent.

Meanwhile across the ballroom...

I saw Kale talking to the guard.

His face doing that thing where he thought he looked charming but really just looked very constipated and very French.

Then Trent walked up behind him.

Glass in hand.

No shirt.

Sheer robe.

Hair still wet from the koi pond.

He sipped champagne and said, very loudly:

“KALE, TELL THIS DUDE ABOUT THE TIME WE STOLE A POLICE TANK AND MADE OUT IN IT TO ESCAPE.”

Then within Kale's point of instability:

The guard's mouth dropped.

I did not blink.

“This man is heavily medicated.”

“NO I'M NOT. I'M JUST FAMOUS. WE'RE THE LOONEY GOONZ!”

I saw three guards stiffen and hands reach for comms.

I turned, locked eyes with Trent.

“You just killed us both.”

Trent grinned.

“What’s death if not a runway walk into the void?”

Cash’s voice crackled in all our ears.

“Uh. Guys? You’ve got six suits moving toward you.

Karyna—Kale just Trent’ed everything.”

I looked at the guards.

I looked at the ceiling.

“Well,” I muttered. “There goes subtlety.”

It was supposed to be simple.

Step one: cause a distraction.

Step two: bait Dwight into a private meeting.

Step three: steal the keys, lift the biometric card, and bounce.

But then somebody’s son showed up with a katana.

He came running through the ballroom doors like a crypto influencer on cocaine and vengeance.

Velvet suit. Bleached eyebrows. Tears. Screaming.

“YOU CUT ME OFF—”

“NOW I’M CUTTING YOU OFF—”

“YOUR HEAD. I’M CUTTING OFF YOUR HEAD.”

And then he sliced Dwight Jonhower’s neck like he was unboxing a podcast mic.

The whole room screamed.

Blood fountained onto a woman in a diamond dress.

Someone fainted onto the shrimp tower.

Two drones spun out mid-air and crashed into a champagne table.

Dwight's son stood over the body, heaving, dripping.

"I NEVER LIKED GALA SEASON!"

Security forgot we existed.

They tackled him.

One guy tased himself.

Kale and Trent stopped pretending to be normal and just walked calmly into the hallway.

Ricardo whispered to Michael:

"Wait... does this mean I didn't ruin the plan?"

Michael:

"Not yet."

Xero grabbed my wrist.

"Move. Now. While the drama's still moist."

I let him pull me through the side corridor.

The noise fading behind us.

My shard pulsing hard and fast against my dress, like it wanted out.

"That was... not in the plan," I muttered.

"Didn't say it wasn't effective," Xero said.

We ducked through a service door marked "Do Not Enter Unless You're Underpaid."

The corridor smelled like bleach, sweat, and floral sabotage.

Half the lights flickered.

The sound of screaming was still echoing somewhere behind us.
My heels were already killing me.
My shard was burning.
Not hot like fire.
Hot like it was thinking.
Like it was listening.
I gripped the wall.
“Xero—stop.”
He turned fast, already scanning for danger.
“What is it?”
“It’s... buzzing. Like louder than usual.”
He stepped close
Lifted the edge of my dress.
The shard was glowing—not soft-pink. Hot-pink. Neon. Pulsing.
I looked up.
His was, too.
On his back.
Glowing through his shirt like a heartbeat caught in a feedback loop.

He touched my arm.
“Are you okay?”
“Yeah—no—yeah I don’t know. It’s not pain, it’s like...”
I trailed off.
Because the second he touched me, both shards synced.
I felt it.
A pulse in my ribs that wasn’t mine.

A voice without language.

Just a pull.

He blinked.

“You felt that?”

I nodded.

Behind us, a side door slammed open.

Two gala guests in designer horror ran in, soaked in wine and absolutely not prepared for reality.

“Is there another party down here—?”

Xero grabbed a mop bucket and launched it.

It hit the floor louder than thunder. They screamed and ran the other way.

“Rude,” I muttered.

They’ll live,” Xero said. “Probably.”

We kept moving, my dress dragging, our shards humming in sync.

Something was happening.

Between us.

Inside us.

And I had no idea if it was making us gods... or turning us into bombs.

The getaway truck looked like if GrubHub was doing a haunted house.

Exterior: “Tulsa Elegant Catering.”

Interior: screaming bags of garbage and one broken karaoke machine.

I climbed in first.

“Why does it smell like shrimp and injustice?”

Ricardo flopped onto a crate of expired croissants.

“Sorry, that’s me.”

“You’re always shrimp,” Michael said. “But this is next-level shrimp.”

Cash was in the passenger seat, yelling into his headset.

“I’m scrubbing all camera feeds from the gala.

No, I didn’t know the guy’s son had a vendetta.

No, I don’t know if his katana was carbon-forged!”

Trent climbed in last.

Everyone went silent.

Because it hit. Immediately.

The smell.

Michael gagged.

Kale blinked slowly like he’d just seen the angel of death.

“Bro,” Ricardo whispered, “did you—?”

“What?” Trent said, smiling.

“Great gala. Real culture. I mingled.”

“You shat yourself, didn’t you?” Kale hissed.

“I mingled.”

Trent opened a juice box and sipped it like a psychopath.

No one said anything for a long beat.

Michael tossed him a pair of hotel towels.

“Wrap your sins and don’t move.”

Xero sat beside me.

Close.

The space between us was electric again.

My shard still buzzed. His probably did too.

He didn't say anything.

Neither did I.

But our eyes locked.

And the whole world went quiet just for a second.

Then Cash turned around and yelled:

"HEY.

Are we gonna talk about how you two are glowing like romantic nukes or should we table that until after we deal with every gang, corpo, and lawman in Tulsa wanting us dead?"

I leaned my head back.

"Let's do both. After a shower."

Smoke In The Bark

We were hiding in a treehouse.

A real one. Like for kids.

Bright red wood, paint peeling like a sunburn.

Half a rope ladder.

One swing still attached.

It said "FORT BUTTBLASTER" on the front in crooked, glitter glue letters.

Which, honestly?

Felt right.

Ricardo was asleep inside a sleeping bag that wasn't his.

Trent was hanging off the porch ledge in a cleaner pair of pants but the same dirty soul.

Michael was whittling something with a butterknife.

Kale was doing pull-ups on a support beam that shouldn't have supported anything.

Cash had a drone flying circles around the backyard, holding a slingshot and a Post-it note that said "NO SNITCHING."

I was sitting with my legs dangling over the edge.

Xero sat behind me, back against the tree trunk.

His knees drawn up, eyes half-lidded, like he was meditating or preparing to kill someone.

Maybe both.

"This is the stupidest safehouse we've ever used," I muttered.

"It's not even a house," Cash called out. "It's an elevated crime coffin."

"Hey," Michael said. "Y'all are acting like this wasn't Ricardo's idea."

Ricardo, half-asleep:

"The tree called to me."

We were so tired.

No plans.

No money.

No ideas.

Just a murder, a katana, and a city on fire.

And then my shard pulsed.

Hard.

Warm.

Like a thought I hadn't had yet.

I looked at Xero.

He didn't look at me.

But his shard lit up too.

A soft hum.

A shared vibration.

Like our bodies had just whispered to each other without mouths.

He finally looked over.

Eyes soft.

"You feel that?"

I nodded.

"Still no clue what it means," I said.

"Me neither," he said.

"But it's ours now."

Xero lay on his back in the corner of the treehouse, arms folded behind his head, eyes closed like he was trying to astrally project into a saner dimension.

Cash, Michael, and Kale were crouched by a half-cracked Etch-a-Sketch, using it like a whiteboard.

"We need a plan," Cash muttered.

"We need money," Kale growled.

"We need a miracle," Michael added.

"Or at least a microwave."

I was bored.

Sleepy.

And, okay, maybe a little chaotic.

So I climbed over to Xero—

Swung a leg over—

Straddled his lap and collapsed onto his chest like I'd been there for years.

He blinked.

Didn't move.

Just gave me a quiet, "oh no" exhale.

Across the room?

Silence.

Then:

"No." Kale said.

"NO. NO, NO, NO—"

"Oh no it's happening again," Michael said, turning to face the corner like a grounded Victorian child.

"She's straddlin' again," Cash said.

"Abort. Abort."

I looked at them.

Smiled sweetly.

Then, in the most exaggerated, overacted way possible, I started fake-humping.

The treehouse creaked.

"UH—uh—UH—uh—OH XERO—"

"I'VE NEVER FELT THIS SPIRITUALLY SYNCED—"

"MAKE IT STOP," Kale screamed, clutching the walls.

"MY EARS. MY INNOCENCE. MY SPERM COUNT."

Ricardo projectile vomited into a plastic bucket that had never asked for this.

Trent turned to vomit in the other direction, but missed.

Cash, gagging, spun left-

Vomited onto Trent.

“WHY?!” Trent howled.

Michael didn’t move.

Still in the corner.

“I’m not here. I’m not here. I’m not here.”

Xero just lay there.

Didn’t even blink.

“You good?” I whispered.

“I’ve accepted death,” he replied.

“Do what you must.”

Cash was the only one still awake by 3AM.

Everyone else was sprawled out in sleeping bags and shame.

The floor was still sticky.

The air was still cursed.

Trent was still gagging every fifteen minutes like a haunted cat.

But Cash?

Cash had a laptop open and four screens duct-taped to the treehouse wall, all flickering horrifying tech gibberish.

“Yo.”

I blinked awake.

“You still decoding shrimp?”

“Nah,” he said. “Not shrimp. Something worse.”

He rotated the screen toward me.

“This signal’s been pinging every time you or Xero’s shard glows. I ran a packet sweep through half the private bands—nothing. Only showed up once I dropped to analog resonance levels.”

“Analog resonance—?”

“It means ghost WiFi. Or magic. Or God’s Bluetooth. Take your pick.”

The screen showed a crude pulsewave—barely registering, flickering like it was deciding whether to exist or not.

Each time I blinked, I thought it was gone.

“What’s it saying?” I asked.

“Not saying. Calling.”

Xero leaned over from behind me, voice raspy.

“Where from?”

“Tower outside the grid,” Cash said, tapping a glowing red mark on a dead zone outside the Tulsa city core.

“Abandoned ComSat array. Real creepy government-type stuff. Nobody’s owned it in twenty years.”

Kale walked over, sipping juice like a man halfway through a stroke.

“It’s bait,” he said. “Nothing pings analog unless it wants to be seen by something illegal.”

Ricardo, now somehow wearing two shirts:

“What if it’s aliens and we get probed but like emotionally?”

Trent, from under a blanket:

“Like how Karyna’s getting emotionally probed every night?”

Silence.

My jaw dropped.

Michael gagged audibly.

Cash’s eyes widened.

Kale turned green.

Ricardo blinked.

“No—wait—”

Too late.

Ricardo vomited violently into a cereal bowl.

Cash spun and puked onto Trent’s sleeping bag.

Trent screamed.

Stood up.

Threw the bag out the window.

Then projectile hurled off the balcony.

Kale collapsed in the corner, wheezing like a dying trumpet.

Michael walked outside into the yard and stared into the night like he needed religion.

Xero didn’t move.

Still glowing softly.

I just looked at Trent.

“Seriously?”

“It was right there,” he shrugged.

“Like a gift.”

Cash dragged out a tarp-covered mass from under the treehouse like it owed him child support.

“Behold: Project Crawldaddy.”

He yanked the cover off.

It was... mostly a lawnmower.

Part drone.

Part exosuit.

Part emotional mistake.

“What the actual hell is that?” Kale muttered, taking a step back.

“Exo rig,” Cash said proudly.

“Reinforced. Gas powered. Buzzes like a goddamn wasp nest when it moves.”

“That’s not a feature, Cash. That’s a reason to call the fire department.”

Ricardo tapped the leg of it and got mildly shocked.

“Nice.”

Michael walked up wearing oven mitts and nodded like a priest at a baptism.

“We are become Death Lawn.”

Cash pulled out a second device: a clunky wristband made of copper coils and duct tape.

“This one dampens shard output, theoretically. Blocks the analog pulse from tracking you. Only works if you don’t move too fast or breathe too hard.”

“So it doesn’t work,” Trent said flatly.

“I never said it was good, I said it was mine.”

I felt Xero’s hand brush mine.

Our shards lit again.

Everyone groaned.

Michael walked away again.

“Stop glowing while we’re trying to prep,” Cash snapped.

“You’re gonna alert the mystery radio ghost sex tower.”

“You’re just jealous,” I smirked.

“Jealous of what, glowing armpits and a soul virus?”

Kale stared at us.

Hard.

“I don’t trust it,” he said. “None of it.”

“You don’t trust fruit, Kale,” Michael said.

“Fruit rots. And so do people with glowing implants.”

The tension crackled under the jokes.

Even through the sarcasm, we all felt it.

Something was waiting at that tower.

And I had a feeling it already knew we were coming.

The party bus had strobe lights, a mirror ball, and a bullet hole the size of a grapefruit.

It also had Ricardo driving, so we were all basically on a timer until death.

“Why are we in a rave coffin?” I asked.

“It had the most working tires,” Cash said, chewing a glowstick.

“And the best aux cord.”

Michael was absolutely blasting psytrance from a playlist called ‘Escape From Suburbia: Volume V.’

Kale hit him in the back of the head with a bottle of apple juice.

“Turn it down before my organs riot.”

Outside, the world got quiet.

Buildings leaned like drunk skeletons.

The walls were covered in old gang tags and newer ones I didn’t recognize.

“This place is too empty,” Xero muttered beside me.

“Even rats know better than to live this far out.”

I nodded.

My shard vibrated faintly.

It felt restless. Like it wanted up. Or out.

“Do you feel that?” I whispered.

“Every second,” he said. “Like my bones are humming.”

We passed a crumbled gas station.

Cash looked up.

“Stop the bus.”

“Did I hit a ghost?” Ricardo asked.

“No. Rooftop. Look.”

We all looked.

Something was up there.

Tall.

Black-clad.

Eyes gleaming.

It ducked down and disappeared.

“It’s watching us,” Kale said quietly.

“Whatever it is.”

“Cool,” Michael said.

“Add that to the growing list of entities that want to eat our teeth.”

We rolled forward again.

Slow.

Careful.

My hand found Xero’s.

Our shards sparked once.
Then settled.
Like they knew what was coming.
Even if we didn't.

The One Who Remembers

The grass cracked under our boots like we were walking on old bones.
We were inside the ComSat grounds now—
Rusty fences half-eaten by vines,
Metal siding sagging like collapsed lungs,
Everything soaked in the silence of a place that used to matter.

Cash kept Karyna at the front of the group.
Me? I was in the back.
“Keep you two from glowing like a pair of radioactive lovebirds,” he said.
“At least until I figure out what this place is doing to the signal.”
I didn't argue.
But I hated it.

Karyna walked ahead of us—
Her ponytail bouncing, arms swinging loose.
She looked relaxed.

Focused.

But I knew better. Her fingers were twitching.

Trent was muttering to himself about satellite frequencies and “sky demons.”

Kale walked beside me.

Too close.

Too casual.

I saw him look.

Not once.

Twice.

A glance at Karyna.

Downward. Right at her ass, actually.

Then held just a few seconds too long.

I didn’t say a word.

Didn’t move.

Just felt something behind my teeth tighten.

“You good, ‘Ro?” Kale said, not looking at me.

“Fine.”

“You sure? You look like you’re about to strangle a sapling.”

“Just watching our six.”

“Yeah,” he said, smirking.

“Me too.”

I let the silence hang.

The wind kicked up dust from the gravel lot.

The tower loomed ahead—tall, skeletal, humming.

And deep in my chest, my shard gave a quiet pulse.
Like it felt everything I didn't say.
We stepped inside the tower through a cracked service hatch.
The walls were weeping rust.
Floor panels creaked under our boots like brittle bones.
It smelled like old power and wet metal.

"Yo, this place is pregnant with creep energy," Ricardo whispered.

Cash was scanning with a shoulder-mounted rig made from a busted microwave and part of a smart fridge.

"I'm getting gravitational variance," he muttered.

"What does that mean?" Michael asked.

"It means gravity's wrong. Something's pulsing beneath us."

My shard burned.

Hot.

Sharp.

Alive.

I stumbled—caught myself on a wall.

Xero looked back—then forward again, jaw clenched.

"Don't think. Don't think. Don't think—"

But I heard it.

My own voice.

In my head.

Saying it back to me.

"Don't think. Don't think. Don't think."

But wrong.

Off.

Like a recording played through teeth.

“Did... anyone else hear that?” I asked.

Everyone stopped.

Even Trent looked sober for a second.

Cash’s scanner started whining.

“There’s something under this building.

Something old.

Something listening.”

Kale looked over at me.

“You’re glowing again.”

“I know,” I said.

“Stop.”

“I can’t.”

The ground beneath us gave a low rumble.

The lights flickered.

The air shifted.

My shard pulsed once—

And somewhere under the tower—

Something pulsed back.

We found the hatch under an old server rack.

Trent stepped on a loose tile and fell halfway through the floor.

“This ain’t up to code,” he groaned.

The hatch was iron-sealed-but humming.

There were markings around it, etched into the concrete like graffiti by someone who never blinked.

Cash waved the scanner.

"That's it. That's where it's coming from. The pulse.

It's talking to your shard, Karyna."

My stomach turned.

My shard pulsed once-

Hard enough to knock air from my lungs.

I stumbled.

Fell to one knee.

My hands shook.

"It's-it's not just humming," I whispered.

"It's pushing. Like it wants out."

Ricardo backed up like I'd started turning into a spaghetti monster.

Kale pointed at me, face twisted.

"Shut it down."

"What?"

"The shard. Turn it off. You're syncing too hard."

"I can't."

"Then get out!"

Xero stepped between us. Calm. Cold.

"Back off."

Kale didn't move.

For a second, I thought he was gonna swing.

But the shard pulsed again.

This time, everyone felt it.

“YOOO,” Michael said, gripping his temples.

“Why do I feel like my teeth are breathing?”

Cash looked at the hatch.

His scanner started shorting out.

“This tower ain’t broadcasting.

It’s receiving.”

The metal hatch hissed.

Dust fell from the ceiling.

And I heard it.

Faint.

Muffled.

But real.

A voice.

From below.

“Karyna...”

The hatch screamed as it opened.

The air underneath didn’t move.

It just existed in static.

Heavy.

Buzzing like a throat full of bees.

We climbed down an iron ladder slick with condensation.

My shard lit up with every rung.

The room below was...

Wrong.

Like a temple made from hard drives.

Black walls veined with pulsing light.

Panels etched with script I couldn't read but recognized like a dream I'd forgotten.

Trent looked around.

"This is not OSHA certified."

Michael spun in a slow circle.

"Looks like HR Giger's router died in here."

In the center of the chamber:

A pod.

Seven feet tall.

Obsidian casing, cracked.

Glowing with the same pink light as my shard.

It pulsed once—

And my shard pulsed back.

Cash backed toward the ladder.

"We're not supposed to be here.

We're not supposed to be here."

"What is that?" Kale hissed.

"A battery? A body?"

"A mirror," Xero whispered.

The symbols on the wall began to glow.

My feet started walking without asking.

I reached the pod—
Felt heat under my skin.
My shard vibrated so hard it hurt.
“Karyna,” Xero said behind me, “Stop. Come back.”
I couldn’t.
My hand raised.
The pod pulsed again.
“Karyna,” I heard from inside it.

Kale stepped back.
“She’s gone. We leave her, or we die here.”
“Then we die,” Xero said.
And then—
The pod opened.
The pod cracked open with a hiss like language forgotten.
Light spilled out like blood from a god.
Then... it stepped forward.
Not walking.
Just appearing.
A humanoid figure made of veins of pink circuitry and shifting metal skin.
Its face glitched like it was trying on expressions from a database.
Eyes glowed—same pink as the shard.
Fingers trailed light.
It looked at me.
And smiled.
“Hello, Karyna.”

Everyone drew weapons.

Michael cocked his pistol.

Trent pulled a crowbar.

Kale primed a grenade.

“Stand down!” he barked.

“Say one more syllable and I paint this room with you.”

The being tilted its head. Calm.

“Karyna Ilyinichna Vladislav,” it said, voice like my own run through static.

“Born 2034. First breath taken beneath tungsten bulb. You are the mirror-key.”

My shard flared.

I couldn’t breathe.

“How do you know me?” I whispered.

It stepped forward again—no weight, no sound.

“Because I remember you,” it said.

“Because we were built for each other.”

Xero’s shard flared too.

He stepped in front of me.

“What are you?”

The being looked at him.

And spoke in his voice.

“I am what you left behind.”

Cash was frantically recording data.

Ricardo dropped his tablet.

Kale took the pin out of the grenade and froze.

“Karyna,” Xero said.

“Get back.”

I shook my head.

The being reached out. Not to grab. Just to touch.

“You are the lock. I am the door.

And they... are not ready to open.”

Then it stepped back—

Into the pod—

And disappeared.

The door sealed.

The room went black.

My shard cooled.

Everyone stood in silence.

And I knew—

Everything was about to change.

House Arrest

We’d been back at the House of Hoodlums for maybe an hour when the argument started.

“Tacos,” Cash said.

“Fast, greasy, spiritually cleansing.”

“Burgers,” Michael said, already holding a frozen spatula like it was a gavel.

“Can stack ’em. Stackable food is efficient food.”

“Fried chicken,” Kale argued, glaring at the fridge like it personally offended him.

“It’s got skin. Skin’s flavor armor.”

“I want soup,” Trent muttered.

Dead silence.

“Soup ain’t fast food, Trent!” Ricardo shouted from the couch.

“That’s sadness water.”

“You’re sadness water,” Trent replied, hurling a sock at him.

It missed and hit Michael’s frozen burrito stash.

This resulted in three minutes of intense violence.

I was curled up in one of the sagging armchairs, legs over Xero’s lap.

He was flipping a knife between his fingers like it was a fidget toy.

“You think they’ll ever decide?” I asked.

“Not before somebody bleeds.”

Eventually, it came down to a coin toss between burgers and tacos.

Cash lost the toss.

Cash also lost not it and had to go.

“Fine,” he groaned. “But I’m getting fries from the wrong place on purpose.”

“Live your villain arc,” Kale muttered.

Xero wandered out to the garage for a smoke.

Kale followed him a minute later, and for once... didn’t start shit.

They stood in silence, side by side.

Just them.

Two men with rage issues, trust issues, and a shared love for tactical gear.

“Y’know,” Kale finally said, “You punch clean. Almost pretty. For a weirdo.”

“You’re not bad either. For a goblin in a tank top.”

“Bitch.”

“Bastard.”

They nodded.

It was, for them, a tender moment.

Minutes later in the driveway, I slipped into Kale’s precious matte-black retro-mod coupe with Xero.

“We shouldn’t,” I whispered.

“We’re gonna,” he said.

And we did.

Things got steamy.

Clothes stayed mostly on, but the windows fogged like a sauna on drugs.

Then the door yanked open.

Kale stood there.

Staring.

Silent.

Face twitching.

“OH COME ON!” he howled.

“NOT MY CAR—THIS IS SACRED METAL!”

“You weren’t using it,” I said sweetly.

“I named her!”

“You should’ve named her quieter.”

Ricardo screamed laughing from the porch.

Cash returned with the food and dropped the bags when he saw Kale trying to exorcise himself.

They were all talking at once.

Bags of fast food torn open like war trophies,

grease bleeding through paper,

fries flying,

Trent already shirtless.

I had a double cheeseburger, half-wrapped and cooling in my hand.

I hadn’t taken a bite yet.

I just... watched them.

Michael was telling some story about the time he tried to steal a petting zoo goat during a blackout riot.

“This bastard headbutted me into a cop car, and I got arrested. Goat got candy.”

“Justice,” Cash said, mouth full of spicy nuggets.

“Goat had intent.”

Ricardo cut in with a story about how he accidentally joined a pyramid scheme cult for 11 months, and only found out when he got invited to an orgy and a timeshare in the same email.

Kale, chewing silently, grinned without looking up.

“I was the goat,” he said quietly.

Dead silence.

Then chaos.

I didn't laugh.

Not because it wasn't funny.

Because I was busy memorizing it all.

The way Cash threw food wrappers at Kale like snowballs.

Michael's obnoxiously loud bite.

Karyna's leg draped over the arm of the couch, socks mismatched, leaning on my shoulder like gravity pulled her there on purpose.

I hadn't had anything like this for a while.

My life had been corridors, locks, hands in my pockets that weren't mine.

No couch.

No stories.

No place to land.

But now—

Here—

There was noise.

And heat.

And laughter.

And me.

And no one was asking me to leave.

"Xe?" Karyna said.

I looked over.

She was holding up a fry, arched like a question mark. "You gonna eat or just cry like a little bitch?"

I smiled.

Took the fry.

Bit it.

“Just soaking it in,” I said.

I didn’t say the rest out loud.

That this felt like home.

That they felt like home.

That even if everything burned tomorrow—

I’d remember this part.

Someone screamed,

“SPINNING BACKFIST, BABY!”

The TV flickered.

Frozen on a frame of one man eating another man’s elbow.

Michael fell off the couch laughing.

Cash poured more vodka into a plastic cowboy boot.

“I call this one The White Out.”

“That’s just vodka.”

“Exactly.”

Trent was mid-speech about how he could beat any marsupial in one-on-one combat.

“Kangaroos are bottom-heavy cowards, I’ve said it since day one.”

“You said that today,” Kale muttered, sipping straight from the bottle.

“I have always said it.”

Ricardo was face down on the floor, mumbling into the rug:

“Tell... soup girl... I loved her...”

“Who?” we all asked.

“...noodle... face...”

Karyna had been slurring in two languages for about an hour before she finally leaned over a trash can and violently rejected everything she’d eaten today and possibly in her whole life.

She looked up, teary-eyed, flushed, and proud.

“I’m fine.”

“Sure, sweetheart,” I said.

She stood, swayed, and immediately headbutted the fridge.

—

I got her to bed.

She mumbled something about “pink ghosts with tummies” and “slapping a duck out of a helicopter” before passing out.

I pulled a blanket over her.

Brushed her hair from her eyes.

She was warm.

Soft.

Safe for now.

In the background, I could still hear the guys.

“Could YOU beat a kangaroo though, Kale?”

“I’d marry the kangaroo before I lost.”

“That’s not better!”

I kissed Karyna’s forehead.

“Night, key.”

And closed the door behind me.

I woke up to the warm, slow horror of something cold and sticky on my scalp.

Karyna was curled into my side, dead to the world.

Peaceful.

Dreaming.

I reached up.

Touched my head.

Brought my hand back down.

Chunky.

I didn't scream.

Didn't move.

Just stared at my fingers like I'd found evidence in a crime scene.

She'd thrown up on my head.

In her sleep.

A direct payload.

And slept through it.

I peeled myself from the sheets like I was emerging from glue.

Didn't even put on a shirt.

Just boxers, a pair of boots, and pure determination.

Walked into the hallway, hair still soggy with betrayal.

Kale was on the floor surrounded by LEGO shrapnel, half-building what looked like a tank with nipples.

Michael was watching him like he was witnessing an act of terrorism.

They looked up.

Went silent.

Then—

“Whoa.” Kale grinned.

“Is that gel or are you just into flavor?”

“You smell like Karyna’s nightmares,” Michael said, nose wrinkling.

“I’m not awake enough to defend myself,” I muttered, passing them.

“Let the yeast soak in,” Kale called after me.

“You need exorcism,” I said.

The bathroom door closed behind me.

Water on.

Silence.

Cleanse.

Meanwhile—

Karyna stirred.

Opened one eye.

Looked at the pillow.

The splatter zone.

“...Oh.”

She groaned.

Rolled out of bed.

Pulled on one of my shirts, oversized, collar sagging over one shoulder.

No pants.

Just pure post-vomit shame energy.

She padded barefoot through the house.

Passed Kale and Michael.

They both looked up.

Kale blinked. Smiled way too wide.

“Well damn, girl. If that shirt rides up any higher, I’m gonna need to go write a poem.”

Michael blinked.

Slowly turned to Kale.

“Okay, you *what?*”

“That was gross.”

Karyna paused.

“I will pour bleach into your cereal.”

Kale grinned harder.

“You think I eat cereal? I drink regret.”

We were all in various states of hangover decay.

Michael had a cold compress taped to his face.

Kale was drinking pickle juice out of a mason jar and whispering to it like it betrayed him.

Trent was face-down on the couch in a pile of loose Lego.

Ricardo had left the planet.

I was curled up beside Xero, still wearing his shirt.

Cash sat cross-legged on the floor, laptop open like a magic book.

“So,” he said.

“Y’all remember that freaky pulsing hive-wall glyph crap from the basement?”

“Vividly,” I said.

“I decoded some. Or like... partially hallucinated them into logic.”

He pulled up a screen.

Dozens of symbols.

Some familiar.

Some wrong.

They didn't stay still.

Each one pulsed slightly.

One blinked.

I blinked back.

"Okay, that one's new," Cash said, pointing.

"What is it?"

"It wasn't there until I booted this up just now."

"Are you sure?"

"I only hallucinate on Fridays. Today is Wednesday."

I leaned closer.

Xero followed.

The symbol twitched.

It began to move.

Shift.

Spiral.

It rotated like a coin in zero-G.

Cash's speakers buzzed.

Michael sat up straight.

Kale dropped his jar.

“Uh,” I said.

“Cash, is that... sound part of it?”

“It’s not coming from the file.”

“Then where’s it—”

“Karyna.”

We all froze.

The voice came through the laptop.

Except... it didn’t.

It came from everywhere.

And only I heard the second part.

“The door is open.”

My shard pulsed.

Xero grabbed my hand.

And for once—

No one said a thing.

Cold As Ice

I’d been hated before.

People hate a girl for all kinds of reasons.

Voice too high.

Face too pretty.

Dreads too white.

Accent too loud.

Too soft. Too hard. Too me.

But this?

This was new.

“So who hates us this week?” I asked.

“Everyone,” Michael said, stirring a pot of dehydrated chili with a knife.

“Like actually everyone. Gangs, cops, bounty hunters, the Better Business Bureau.”

“The BBB?” I blinked.

“We left a Yelp review on that insurance scammer with a bomb,” Ricardo said proudly.

“I drew the Yelp logo in the crater.”

“So helpful,” I said.

The Looney Goonz were used to hate.

What we weren’t used to was tactical hate.

Everyone had eyes.

No more reckless runs.

No more open turf beefs.

Even Kale was walking quieter these days.

Well. Quieter.

Still punching street signs when mad, but less yelling.

We needed cash.

Not party-favor cash.

Not “buy a bottle and a bootleg anime box set” cash.

We needed intel money.

Shard research money.

Get the damn cops off our scent money.

“So we’re back to robbing gangs,” Cash said.

“Like old times,” Kale grinned.

“Who’s the target?” I asked.

Cash pulled up a file.

Flickered to life on the war room wall.

THE ICE N9NE PO\$\$E

Gang summary:

- Neon guns
- Gold grills
- Face tats that say “Loyalty” but spelled “LOIALTEE” • Deal in crypto, narcotics, and NFTs made of mugshots

“God, they look like suburban kids in GTA mods,” Trent muttered.

“Yeah,” Xero said, voice tight.

“That’s them.”

I turned to him.

“Wait—what do you mean ‘that’s them’?”

“...I used to roll with N9ne.”

Everyone went silent.

Ricardo blinked.

“Are we gonna have to kill your old friends?”

“They’re not my friends.”

Kale leaned forward.

“Do they know you left?”

“They think I ghosted.”

“You didn’t?” I asked.

“...I exploded one of their vans and then ghosted.”

Ricardo raised his hands.

“So we’re definitely gonna have to kill your old friends.”

“So what’s the cover story?” Michael asked, checking the charge on a stun grenade.

“We’re engineers,” I said.

“You’re Mixlord 3000. Cash is BeatzBySatan. Xero’s DJ Dropdead.”

“I hate this already,” Xero muttered.

“You picked that name,” I reminded him.

“I was drunk.”

We moved in pairs.

Cash, Michael, and Xero taking the side entrance.

Me, Kale, and Ricardo staged in the alley with a scrambler rig.

The building was ugly as sin—graffiti murals of Drake with angel wings and Tupac riding a tiger.

Inside, it pulsed with bass.

Purple LED lighting.

The stench of weed, ego, and half-melted vape juice.

“Yo,” one gang member said as they walked past Michael.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Your auditory salvation,” Michael said, deadpan.

“He’s here to fix your levels,” Cash added.

“Your bars sound like phlegm with a head injury.”

“Damn,” Xero muttered.

“Y’all really talking that shit with guns this close?”

“Bro, if I die, I die funny,” Cash said.

They passed another room.

Inside: a shirtless dude with pink dreads and a chain with a miniature AK47 pendant rapped aggressively at a mirror.

“Yo,” Cash whispered.

“That’s Skrap-Topher. His debut album was just 47 minutes of screaming.”

“He dropped out of high school to autotune his own name,” Michael added.

“Man, don’t talk too loud,” Xero said, grinning.

“You might summon his ghostwriter.”

“Damn!” Michael laughed.

And then they hit the main hallway.

A member of the Ice N9ne Po\$\$e was walking the other way, balancing a plate of neon chicken nuggets and an Uzi.

He looked up.

Froze.

His eyes locked on Xero.

Everything slowed.

“...Xero?”

“Shit,” Xero whispered.

“XERO?! AYYY, YOU STILL OWE ME A GLOCK, YOU SKEEVY BITCH—”

Cash threw a flashbang.
Michael yelled,
“ENGAGEMENT ENGAGEMENT!”
Xero tackled the guy into the wall.
The tray of neon nuggets exploded.
I heard it all through comms.
“We’re live,” I said to Kale and Ricardo.
“Time to remix this bitch.”
The flashbang went off like God sneezing.

I slammed the Po\$\$e guy into a pile of bootleg Yeezys and kept moving.
Michael drew dual pistols like it was recess at an exorcism.
Cash screamed,
“Y’ALL SHOULDA STAYED ON SOUNDCLOUD!”
The studio lit up.
LED strips sparked.
Speakers exploded.
Somebody’s mixtape started playing from hell.
“WHY IS THERE A TRACK CALLED ‘GLOCKTOPUS?!’” Michael shouted.
And then I saw him.
Rheddrum.
Hair twisted into metal-dipped dreads.
Tattoo of my name crossed out under his jaw.
Holding a chrome TEC-9 like it was a pet.
He looked at me.

His smile curdled.

“Xero. You fake side-quest-ass motherfucker.”

“Hi, Rheddrum,” I muttered.

“Still yelling your own name like Pokémon?”

“You LEFT,” he snarled.

“You BLEW my car up.”

“Your car was full of fentanyl and PlayStation gift cards.”

“It was LIMITED EDITION.”

He raised the TEC-9.

I ducked behind a platinum plaque that said ‘Certified Vibe Dealer.’

The plaque shattered.

Michael dove in from the side, dropkicking a bass amp.

“We got forty seconds before backup rolls in!” he shouted.

Cash tossed me a custom pistol.

“You wanna close the tab with this guy?”

“I am the tab.”

I stood.

Faced Rheddrum.

Gun in hand.

The room faded.

It wasn’t about loot.

It wasn’t about the Po\$\$e.

It was about me.

About who I used to be.

I fired once.

He missed his shot.

I didn't.

Rheddrum collapsed against the wall.

Smiling.

"You always were good at ghosting."

"And you were always louder than you were smart."

Cash pulled the creds cache from a server rack.

Michael lit a weed-scented smoke bomb.

The bass kept thumping.

We disappeared into the beat.

The SUV was impossible to miss.

Chrome skin.

LED underglow.

The license plate read:

"💵💎FYEBOY💎💵"

We didn't care.

"Michael," I said.

"You're not driving."

"But it matches my vibe," he argued.

"You have four warrants and a moral allergy to turn signals."

Cash hotwired the nav system with a waffle iron-looking device and a flash drive.

"Their media server is unlocked."

"What's on it?" Ricardo asked.

"Voice memos, track stems, sixteen freestyles, one AutoTune scream album, and a diss track against a Chick-fil-A employee."

Michael leaned in.

“Wait. Play that right now.”

Bass exploded from the speakers.

“CHICK -FIL- AYYYYYYYYYYY—YOU MESSED UP MY SAUCES—”

I reached over Xero to hit mute.

“NO. We are not listening to Sauce Requiem Part IV.”

Cash laughed.

Michael sulked.

Xero didn’t say anything.

He just stared out the window.

Arms crossed.

Quiet.

I studied him.

There was blood on his sleeve.

Not his.

His jaw clenched the way it does when he feels something.

When he won’t say it.

I leaned over.

Took his hand.

He didn’t look at me.

But he squeezed it.

Tight.

I just kissed his cheek.

Then handed him the aux cord.

“Your turn to DJ.”

He blinked.

Smiled.

Plugged in.

Track starts:

“Looney Goonz Anthem — Po\$\$e’d Up Remix”

Sampled gunfire.

Cash’s voice yelling “Y’ALL SHOULDA STAYED ON SOUNDCLOUD.”

Michael dropped a beat with his mouth over it.

Ricardo harmonized with a Gatorade bottle and shame.

And I—

I just laughed.

The house smelled like gun oil and Gatorade.

Ricardo had passed out halfway up the stairs.

Cash was asleep under the table.

Kale was building a Lego tank out of spite.

Michael was in the bath with his shoes still on.

Xero and I slipped into Trent’s old room.

The closet-evicted coward was back in the hallway now, and he hadn’t replaced the lightbulb. So everything was tinted pink.

Not from a lamp.

From us.

The shard in my abdomen glowed faintly.

So did the one across his back.

We were like two pieces of something not-quite-human, synced through whatever this thing was.

Whatever we were.

We didn't undress.

Didn't mess around.

We just crawled onto the mattress on the floor.

I laid on his chest.

His hand in my hair.

No one said anything for a long time.

Then he whispered—

“They were my old crew. The Po\$\$e.”

I didn't move.

“I left ‘cause I didn't like who I was with them.”

I reached up. Traced the outline of the glowing shard in his spine.

“And now?”

He just smiled.

I could hear Michael yelling in his sleep from across the house.

Could hear Trent kicking the hallway closet door like it owed him money.

Could hear Cash sleep-snoring to the beat of his own DJ drops.

And I just held on tighter.

We weren't normal.

We weren't safe.

But we weren't alone.

Not anymore.

Names, Nines, & Nonsense

There was something sickly peaceful about the back alley.
Like it hadn't decided whether it was disease or nostalgia.
Broken neon.
Wet asphalt.
A crushed vape pen with "GRIMAPPLE DEATHFOG"
Cash was on overwatch, eyes glued to the drone feed.
Michael was singing "Booty So Large It Has Its Own ZIP Code" quietly under his breath.
Trent was shaking like he'd seen a ghost do something sexually compromising.
And Xero was next to me.
Still.
Quiet.
Then he said:
"My name's not really Xero."
I turned.
"I figured."
"It's Viktor. Viktor Mikhailovich Kazakov."
The name sat heavy in the air. Felt familiar, safe.
"You sound like a chess grandmaster who moonlights as a hitman."
He smirked.
"Belarusian."
I nodded.

“You didn’t want to tell me before?”

“Just figured at some point you’d know.”

He looked at me.

Eyes softer than I’d ever seen.

“You’re beautiful, Karyna.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t get sappy. We got blood to spill.”

Cash’s voice crackled in over comms.

“Convoy in view. Two armored SUVs. One armored meathead driving. Three shooters. Full crate in the back—confirmed weapons and cash.”

“Time to poop the plan,” Ricardo said.

“Pretty sure you mean ‘drop the plan.’” Xero corrected.

“No,” Cash replied. “I absolutely mean poop.”

Trent whispered:

“I don’t like this—what if they see us? What if they got a sniper? What if I—”

A long, awkward silence.

Michael looked over.

“Bro... did you just—”

“NO I DIDN’T.”

A smell like hot betrayal and broken diet wafted through the alley.

Kale gagged.

“He did. Oh, bro, he did.”

Ricardo stepped back.

“I can taste the panic.”

Cash over comms:

“I felt that from the roof.”

“FIRE IN THE HOLE,” Michael yelled.

The Ice N9ne SUVs turned the corner.

Everything ignited.

Flashbangs.

Gunfire.

Xero dove forward with fluid, Belarusian death energy.

Kale was screaming.

Michael was laughing.

Trent was trying to pretend the poop wasn’t real.

I shot a tire out, slid behind a crate, and smiled.

This?

This was love.

Bullets screamed louder than Kale.

The Po\$\$e’s front SUV jackknifed into a pile of old bikes and a questionable mattress.

Back doors flew open.

Neon guns.

Gold teeth.

Bad lyrics.

Michael dove through the busted windshield, pistol-whipping a guy mid-sentence.

Ricardo ducked behind a flaming trash barrel and yelled,

“I’M ON FIRE! Wait—nope, just emotionally on fire.”

Cash’s drone buzzed overhead, dropping a non-lethal EMP puck that definitely flattened someone’s manhood.

I saw Xero move.

Like a flicker of rage in a trench coat.

He crossed the alley in seconds and slammed into a tall guy in a pink puffer vest with “ICE X” tattooed across his neck.

They locked eyes.

“Xero,” the man smirked.

“Came back to finish what you started?”

“Nah,” Xero said, pulling a blade.

“Just came to delete the sequel.”

They went down swinging.

Fists. Elbows. Gun butts.

Ice X headbutted Xero hard enough to snap blood from his brow.

Xero grinned through it.

He drove a knee into the man’s gut, rolled over him, and slammed his boot into the gangbanger’s face.

Once.

Twice.

A third time—until teeth popped loose and blood poured like cheap synth-wine.

Then came the knife.

Xero mounted him.

Dragged the blade from jaw to temple, not killing— not yet.

Just ruining.

“You copied my look,” he snarled.

“Recycled my name.”

He raised the blade again.

“But you forgot one thing—”

And drove it down—not into the chest, but straight into the guy’s mouth.

The skull cracked like a cantaloupe dropped from heaven.

The eyes bulged.

The jaw detonated outward in a gout of blood, foam, and pinkish sludge.

A wet pop.

A burst of heat.

Then silence.

Xero stood.

Covered in viscera.

He wiped the blade on his sleeve.

Breathed once.

Michael looked up from a pile of unconscious Po\$\$e members and said,

“You good, bro?”

Xero replied, calm and cold:

“I feel better than I’ve felt in years.”

The diner was called EGGZOTIC.

Open 24 hours.

Smelled like hot mustard, mop water, and crushed dreams.

Cash picked a booth with a charger.

Ricardo ordered six pancakes and a vodka soda.

Michael dumped salt in a bowl and called it his “meat cleanser.”

Kale stared at a menu like it had personally betrayed him.

I sat beside Xero.

He hadn’t cleaned all the blood off yet.

Some had dried into cracks in his knuckles.

I leaned into him, quiet.

“You okay?”

“Don’t know.”

A pause.

“Feels like I buried part of me. But I’m still breathing. So that’s... something.”

Trent arrived last.

Everyone turned.

Like one synchronized organism of suspicion.

Michael didn’t even blink.

“You shit yourself again?”

“NO!”

Kale sniffed loudly.

“It smells like betrayal and protein bars.”

Cash muttered:

“Trent, I swear to God, we could carbon date your pants.”

“There’s nothing in my pants!”

“Except crime,” Ricardo added.

Xero sipped water.

“So we’re just pretending he didn’t do it again?”

“Yes,” I sighed

“It’s coping.”

“Smells like coping died in a sauna.”

Cash dropped a credit stick on the table.

“Total take: 78,000 creds and six unregistered firearms.”

“That buys us a week’s safety and one good breakfast,” Kale muttered.

Ricardo burped.

“Also, Trent pooped his pants. I just needed to say it one more time.”

And somewhere in all of it—Xero smiled.

For real.

The Root Problem

You know you’re in for a weird day when the doctor opens with:

“So. Which one of you has a tomato in their colon?”

We were in a black market diagnostics center—somewhere between a dentist’s office and a meth lab, with a little bit of haunted yoga studio energy.

Kale was pacing.

Ricardo was eating cough drops like candy.

Michael had already broken one of the chairs just by sitting with attitude.

Xero sat beside me, quiet, jaw locked.

The tech brought up the scans.

Six bioscans lined the wall.

Color-coded. Annotated. Glowing.

She started with me.

“Subject Karyna Vladislav. The shard has rooted along spinal nerve clusters, up into the hypothalamus, and—”

She paused. Looked at the screen again.

“...Also, you’re pregnant.”

The room went dead silent.

Ricardo dropped his cough drop.

Michael coughed up his cough drop.

Xero didn’t move.

Didn’t blink.

I blinked enough for both of us.

“I’m what?”

The doctor pointed to the screen.

Sure enough, dead center was a small, flickering blip.

“Approximately seven weeks. Viable embryo. No anomalies at this stage. Heartbeat strong.”

Cash mouthed “WHAT THE FUUUUU—” behind his knuckles.

Trent dropped his vape and just said,

“Oh damn.”

Kale squinted at the screen.

“Wait, wait, wait. Is that like a tumor? Like an adorable tumor?”

“No,” I said slowly.

“That’s a baby.”

“Like... a human baby?”

“Yes.”

“...Inside you?”

I nodded. Slowly.

Kale tilted his head like a confused dog.

“Hold on. I thought eggs only turn into babies when they get fertilized.”

“That’s literally what this is.”

“So you’re telling me the eggs are real? Like chicken eggs?”

Michael groaned.

“My guy. Do you think women lay them?”

“I don’t know, man, I went to public school.”

We *ALL* went to public school, what are you talkin’ about?”

Xero hadn’t said a word.

He stared at the monitor like it might turn into a bomb.

Then finally:

“...Seven weeks.”

I nodded.

He looked at me, voice quiet, raw:

“Do you want to talk about this?”

“Not here.”

The doctor continued like we hadn’t just time-warped into a whole new genre.

“The shard root system appears to be neurologically fused to both Subject Karyna and Subject Xero. The binding is unique. Adaptive. Symbiotic.”

“That’s normal, right?” Ricardo asked, half-hopeful.

“It’s deeply abnormal.”

“Like tomato-in-the-gut abnormal?” he added.

“Less salad. More existential risk.”

Ricardo raised his hand.

“So we keeping the baby, or nah?”

I threw a pen at his face.

The alley behind the clinic smelled like hot wires and cat piss.

Perfect backdrop for a full-blown identity crisis.

Xero and I walked slow.

Didn’t talk.

Didn’t need to.

The sound of our boots on cracked asphalt said plenty.

Xero leaned against the brick wall, arms crossed, staring at a neon reflection in a puddle.

“It’s weird,” he said.

“I used to fantasize about disappearing. Now I can’t imagine it.”

I looked at him.

He didn’t meet my eyes.

“Whatever you choose,” he said.

“I stay.”

My throat tightened.

Just... the idea of being chosen in a life that never felt mine.

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

“You don’t have to know. Not now.”

He stepped closer.

Our shoulders touched.

“We’ll figure it out,” he said.

“Even if the kid’s got pink-glowing brain roots?”

“Especially then.”

Then the back door slammed open.

“OKAY,” Kale shouted, holding a broken mop like a sword

“So when does the baby start training?”

We both froze.

“...Training?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah—I got this. You think I haven’t always wanted a little Goonz apprentice to pass my deadly knowledge to?”

Xero blinked.

“What deadly knowledge? You got beat up by a bartender last week.”

“That was emotional warfare.”

Kale paced like he was lecturing an invisible dojo.

“Listen, by age three, we’ll have ‘em dual-wielding switchblades and emotionally detached. By five—rooftop takedowns. By seven—tax fraud.”

“By eight,” I muttered, “therapy.”

He stopped, squinting at me.

“Wait... does the baby live in your ribs or your butt? I still don’t fully get this.”

“Oh my God, Kale—”

“WE’LL TRAIN IT OUT OF ME.”

And somehow, in all the weight of mutation and mystery and maybe-parenthood...

I laughed.

Xero did too.

The first real one.

You ever think about being a dad?"

Michael blinked at me.

"Hell no. I'd rather be eaten by my own clone."

We were sitting on the curb outside the ramen bar.

I had a takeout bowl in my lap, half-forgotten.

Cash leaned on a car behind me, puffing on a vape that smelled like peppermint regret.

"What brought this up?" Cash asked, exhaling a neon puff.

"I don't know," I muttered.

"Maybe the seven-week-old glow-baby rooted in my spine."

Michael sipped his broth.

"Yeah, that'll do it."

I picked at my noodles.

"Can I even do this? Like, be a mom? While living like this? Running jobs. Evading bounty hunters. Avoiding vomit puddles and flying guns."

"Not to mention Trent." Michael added.

"Yeah," I said. "I don't want it to come out Trent-coded."

Cash cracked a smile.

“Look, you being worried about it? That’s already a better start than most of us got.”

“Yeah,” Michael said.

“My mom once sold me for cigarettes and a waffle iron. And I turned out okay.”

“You lit your own pants on fire last week.” I said disappointedly

“Fashion is pain.”

I let my head rest back against the car door.

The ramen was cold now. I didn’t care.

“I’m just scared.”

“You should be,” Cash said gently.

“But fear don’t mean no. It just means ‘not alone.’”

MEANWHILE:

Inside the warehouse—

Xero stood shirtless, spray-painting Ricardo’s back bright green.

Ricardo laughed so hard he fell into a cardboard box full of old sex dolls.

Kale yelled,

“CAMOUFLAGE IS AN ART FORM! IF I SEE ONE STRIPE OUT OF ALIGNMENT, I’LL BITE YOU.”

Trent was crouched behind an old forklift, slathered in spray paint, whispering,

“I am the wall.”

Xero looked up, paint-splattered, grinning.

“We look insane.”

“INSANELY INVISIBLE, MY DEAR BRUVAH,” Kale bellowed in an English accent, his abs a swirling mess of green spirals.

Back outside, I heard their laughter echo through the warehouse.

Loud.

Stupid.

Alive.

And somehow... it made things feel just bearable enough.

“Operation Green Ghost is go.”

Kale whispered it like it was sacred doctrine.

He stood on the roof, painted head to toe in neon forest green, shirtless and flexing in the moonlight like a radioactive wrestler.

Trent crouched beside him with a PVC pipe he’d called The Truth Tube.

“Remember,” Cash said over comms, “this is a low-profile op. Just extract the crate and—”

Michael cut him off.

“Define low-profile.”

“No explosions. No killing. Minimal screaming.”

“That’s anti-Goons.”

We dropped in through a shattered skylight.

Soft landing.

One guard at a console. Unarmed.

I motioned: quiet.

Then behind me, Ricardo whispered too loud—

“I think I’m melting. This paint is burning my nipples.”

He sneezed.

Loud.

He tumbled backward off the ledge into a stack of aluminum trays with a noise that sounded like God dropping a drum set.

“WHO’S THERE?!” the guard yelled, standing up.

Before anyone could respond, Kale screamed:

“I AM THE VERDANT DEMON. FEEL MY LEAFY WRATH.”

He leapt from the ceiling.

Mid-air.

Green.

Naked except his boots.

Trent tried to follow but tripped and dropped The Truth Tube, which exploded into a cloud of powdered sugar and baby powder—no one knew why it was in there.

Michael landed behind the guard and choked him out with a handful of live wires, muttering,

“I miss when jobs started with maps and plans.”

By the time I reached the server rack, everything smelled like:

- Spray paint
- Fear
- Kale’s armpits

I found the crate. Ripped the tag. Plugged in the decrypt stick.

Then—

Karyna’s voice over comms:

“How’s stealth going?”

I looked at Kale, ripping his own pants in half while making owl noises.

“...Perfect.”

“Okay, everyone shut up,” Cash said.

“If this file’s just porn, I’m uninstalling your brain.”

We were back in the war room.

Still half-painted. Still laughing.

Kale was shirtless, eating dry spaghetti out of a bag.

Ricardo smelled like regret and adhesive.

Michael passed out on the floor like a warning to future criminals.

Cash loaded the data crate onto the rig.

A folder popped up.

PROJECT_DELPHI_7787_V.

Subfolders:

- Subjects
- Notes
- Audio
- Shard_Data
- Incident_Log

I felt the back of my neck get tight.

“...Why does this look like a spy dossier?” I asked.

Cash didn’t answer. He clicked SUBJECTS.

Six profiles.

- KARYNA V.
- VIKTOR K. (alias: Xero)
- TRENT M.
- MICHAEL J.
- CASH D.
- K. BELLAMY (alias: Kale)

And in each file:

Photos. Video stills. Neural activity maps. Social pattern analyses. Predicted loyalty fracture points.

“This is us,” Xero said quietly.

He stepped closer to the screen, his name glowing like an accusation.

“They’ve been following us. Watching.”

“Who the hell is ‘they?’” I asked.

Cash opened INCIDENT_LOG.

There was a list of every major event we’d caused. Even some we didn’t know they saw.

- Voodoo cache theft
- Project Delphi disruption
- Karyna shard synchronization
- Xero’s integration
- Pregnancy confirmation

The last line?

‘Subject sync estimated at 78%. Host viability: escalating. Begin Delphi Phase II.’

Trent cleared his throat.

“So, uh... not a weapons crate?”

Michael stirred on the floor.

“Wake me when the government stops playing Pokémon Go with our souls.”

But I couldn’t laugh.

Because at the bottom of the screen, under Shard_Data, there was a line that said:

‘Secondary host detected: pending emergence.’

And beside it—

A silhouette.

A shape.

Vague. But familiar.

It looked like... a child.

Through A Whisper

There were seven of us around the table.

Five empty bottles of ginger soda.

One bottle of not ginger soda (thanks, Ricardo).

And a bowl of stale fries that had become the emotional centerpiece of our crisis.

“Let’s just ask the obvious,” Michael said.

“Why does this Project Delphi thing exist?”

“Yeah,” Kale added. “Are we famous? Or is this like... clinical stalking?”

Trent raised a hand.

“Do I look hot in my surveillance pictures? I need to know the aesthetic before I get mad.”

Cash brought up the files again.

The word “SUBJECT” blinked in sterile grey.

“It’s not just us being watched,” he said.

“This reads like... lab notes. Like we’re the test.”

Xero had been silent until now.

He finally leaned forward, voice low.

“It was too easy.”

We all looked at him.

“What was?” I asked.

“The heist. The crate. All of it. We were painted neon green. The infiltration team was high on acid. Ricardo was screaming about being a cactus. And still... we walked out clean.”

Michael narrowed his eyes.

“So you’re saying...”

“Someone wanted us to find it,” Xero said.

The room went quiet.

Even Trent stopped scrolling on his phone.

“Like bait?” I asked.

Xero nodded.

“Or an invitation.”

Cash tapped a key, flipping through network traces.

“There were no traces of encryption. No outbound tracking. Nothing phoning home.”

“Which is exactly what you’d do if you wanted us to relax.” Kale said.

Everyone turned to him.

He blinked.

“What? I read spy manga.”

Xero rubbed his temples.

“I’ve seen traps before. You don’t use chains. You use choices. You dangle just enough truth, then sit back and watch what the rats do.”

Ricardo leaned over and whispered to me,

“Are we the rats?”

I nodded.

“The gooniest rats.”

And still... I couldn’t shake the image:

The scan.
That glowing silhouette.
The words pending emergence.
Something inside me was growing.
And someone—somewhere—was counting down.
We hit the building like a wrecking ball made of sarcasm and suppressed trauma.

Downtown Tulsa. High-rise. Midnight.
Kale kicked open the revolving door with both boots and screamed,
“SURPRISE INSPECTION!”
Trent slipped trying to roll through behind him and cracked his vape pod on the floor.
Classic.
Cash was scanning for heat signatures.
“Still nothing. No guards. No drones. No—wait. One heat sig. Top floor. Alone.”
“Trap?” I asked.
“Ain’t not a trap,” he replied.

We rode the elevator in silence.
Me. Karyna. Michael. Ricardo. Cash. Kale. Trent.
Ricardo was chewing gum like it owed him rent.
Karyna tapped the shard in her stomach through her hoodie, like it might start glowing again.
The top floor opened into glass and chrome and eerie stillness.
Modern. Minimal. Creepy as shit.
A boardroom stretched ahead.
And in the center—

A single man in a lab coat.

Sitting.

Smiling.

“You’re late,” he said. “But I knew you’d come.”

Kale immediately pointed a gun at him.

“Start explaining or start dying.”

The man didn’t flinch.

“I’m Dr. Felix Hart. Project Lead, Delphi Sector 9. And I can tell you everything.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because if I don’t,” he said calmly, “you’ll all be dead in seventy-two hours.”

The room went still.

Even Ricardo stopped chewing.

Karyna stepped forward, voice low.

“Who the hell are we to you?”

Dr. Hart smiled.

“You’re not subjects anymore.”

“Then what are we?”

His eyes flicked to me. Then to her.

Then to the pink glow through her hoodie.

“You’re the variable. The rest of them?” He gestured to the crew.

“They’re just the control.”

Dr. Hart folded his hands.

“Ninety-three miles outside Tulsa,” he said, “something came down from orbit.”

“Like a spaceship?” Trent whispered.

“Like a seed.”

He tapped the table.

A hologram flickered to life.

A pinkish crystalline shape — almost beautiful, almost alive — rotating slowly.

“We didn’t know what it was at first. We assumed impact debris. Meteoric. Contaminated.”

“It wasn’t.”

“The core housed organic memory lattice. Adaptive. Self-propagating. Reactive to electrical systems.”

Cash squinted.

“So, an alien flash drive?”

“More like a mold that reconfigures its host.”

He looked at me. Then at Xero.

“We call it V27. The twenty-seventh attempt to bind its properties to human DNA. Your shard isn’t just a tracker. It’s rewriting you.”

Kale snorted.

“So what? We’re alien hybrids now? Do I get tentacle powers?”

“No. But your nervous system, sharper. Faster. You form neural pathways in seconds that would normally take months.”

Dr. Hart’s expression tightened.

“Delphi is a proving ground. Prototypes for soldier enhancement. Civilian upgrades. Full-body firmware patches. Biotech for the masses.”

“Like DLC for your spleen?” Cash added.

“Exactly. One day, instead of a pacemaker, you’ll buy a combat mod. Instead of a therapist, you’ll download empathy firmware.”

I leaned on the table.

“You’re selling evolution?”

Hart looked almost proud.

“The future isn’t human, Ms. Vladislav. It’s interfaced.”

Xero stepped forward.

His voice wasn’t loud. But it cut.

“You’re turning us into products.”

“Into possibilities,” Hart said.

“Without consent.”

“You were children in a foreign village, Disposable. That made you viable.”

There was silence.

Until Michael muttered,

“So are we gonna blow this place up before or after he finishes his TED Talk?”

“I’m not supposed to be talking to you,” Dr. Hart said.

“But I ran the numbers. Your child changes everything.”

That word again.

Child.

It still didn’t feel real in my mouth. Or in my body.

But Hart’s eyes locked on me like I was an ignition key.

“We designed V27 to integrate through trauma, surgical implants, neurochemical stimulation.”

“But you...” He looked at me.

“And you...” He turned to Xero.

“You’ve created something that doesn’t need a shard.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, my voice barely steady.

“Your child is native. It will be born with V27 fully fused to its genome. Not reactive, but instinctive. Faster healing. Elevated cognition. Pre-cognitive reflex memory. Possibly even inter-network synaptic linkage.”

Cash blinked.

“Bro, did you just say our unborn goon baby has Wi-Fi?”

Dr. Hart ignored the interruption.

“The people running Delphi—military-industrial contractors, global buyers, black-budget types—they want to own the future. Not birth it.”

“And your child... threatens that.”

Xero stepped forward.

“Why tell us this?”

Hart smiled.

“Because no matter how this ends... you deserve to know.”

Then—

POP.

Like a firecracker.

A splatter of red mist exploded from Hart’s head.

One second he was standing.

The next—

A wet slump against the wall.

My body locked up. Ears ringing.

Michael ducked.

Cash hit the floor.

Xero shielded me instantly. No questions. No hesitation.

Kale was already pulling his pistol.
No follow-up shot.
No alarm.
Just—
Silence.
And thoughts screaming.
On the table, the last thing Hart uploaded was still glowing:
“CHILD PROTOCOL: ACTIVE”
And under that:
“GENOME CLASS: OMEGA-V27 | STATUS: UNGOVERNED”
“We need to go,” Xero whispered in my ear.
And I nodded.
Because if what Hart said was true...
Then I wasn’t just carrying our child.
I was carrying their next war.

The war room still smelled like old curry and solder smoke.
No one had cleaned since last week.
Hart’s blood was probably still on my boots.
I hadn’t checked. I didn’t want to.
Michael paced like a wolf in denim.
“We should’ve smoked that building. Flattened it.”
Cash tapped at a console, fingers twitchy.
“There was no building. It’s already wiped. Live-streamed firewall detonation the second Hart went down. Everything’s gone.”
Ricardo chewed a pen lid.

Trent was using a glow stick as a stress toy.

Xero sat beside me, silent.

Too silent.

Kale broke the stillness.

“Sooooo... what if the baby has laser eyes?”

Everyone glared at him.

“I’m just saying,” he said, hands up, “we train it early. Knife skills. Tracking. Stealth diaper changes. Boom. Assassin toddler.”

“You’re not raising our child,” I said.

“Not raising. Mentoring. Totally different vibe.”

Xero finally spoke.

“They’ll come after us harder now.”

He didn’t look at me when he said it.

His voice was even. Hollow.

“We’re not a joke anymore. We’re data. Genetic capital. Asset class.”

Michael cracked his knuckles.

“Then we make ‘em pay to come knockin.’”

Cash leaned back, rubbing his face.

“You realize how bad this is, right? The military wanted a biotech seed, and instead you two just accidentally speedran evolution.”

“Speedran life,” Trent added. “Got the no-glitch pregnancy ending.”

Kale was already sketching something on the whiteboard.

“Name ideas. Gender-neutral. Tactical. Consider: Bladelynn. Or Kevlarious.”

Michael threw a marker at his head.

I stood.

My hands were shaking, but I put them on the table.

“We’re not running.”

Everyone looked up.

“They want us erased? Too late. We’ve already changed everything.”

Xero met my eyes.

And this time, he didn’t look away.

Beta Baby

Seven weeks pregnant.

That’s what the test said.

That’s what Dr. Hart said.

That’s what the files on Project Delphi said.

But the mirror?

The mirror said otherwise.

I stared at myself in the cracked bathroom glass.

Wearing Xero’s black tank top, stretched over my stomach now. The same one that used to hang loose, grungy, perfect. Now it looked like I was shoplifting a cantaloupe under it.

“It’s been ten days. How the hell—”

“You still in there, belly Hulk?” Michael called from outside the door.

“We’re voting on who has to go buy more ramen. You’re included.”

I walked out, barefoot, hoodie unzipped.

Cash looked up from his mess of wires and snacks.

“Holy shit,” he muttered.

“I know.”

“That’s not a food baby. That’s a V27 alpha fetus.”

“What does that even mean?”

“I dunno,” he said. “But it’s happening fast.”

Xero was sitting on the armrest of the couch, sketching something in his journal. He looked up and froze.

“Kary...”

He didn’t say anything else.

He didn’t need to.

His eyes said everything: shock, awe, fear, protectiveness, maybe even love.

Ricardo walked in eating a hot pocket and said,

“Damn, that thing’s growing like it owes rent.”

“You want me to knit it a baby glock?”

Trent didn’t look up from a corner where he was cleaning his rifle.

“She’s clearly being fast-forwarded by an alien USB stick. I say we name it Skip.”

Kale stood in the kitchen doorway, arms crossed.

“I told you,” he said. “This is how evolution works.”

“You think this is evolution?” I asked.

“Hell yeah. You’re gonna birth the boss level. The child of two combat-grade lovers with experimental neural tech. We’re all just DLC now.”

I sat next to Xero.

He didn’t touch me. Just looked.

“You okay?” I whispered.

He nodded. Then shook his head. Then nodded again.

“You’re changing,” he said. “And I can’t stop it.”

“Do you want to?”

His jaw clenched.

“No. But I want to slow it down.”

Cash suddenly sat up straight.

“We need a bio-metric tether. Something to track fetal development in real time. And maybe a neural pacifier. I dunno. Delphi left us no manual.”

Michael grabbed a burrito off the counter and muttered,

“That thing better come out with good vibes and a tiny middle finger or I’m suing fate.”

And in my head?

The shard was buzzing again.

Faint.

Pink.

Like it was talking.

But not to me.

To it.

“Wait. Back up,” I said, still holding my stomach like it was about to announce world domination.

“You what?” Michael asked, turning to Ricardo.

“I met him on FratTaps. Real niche market,” Ricardo said.

“He was like ‘Not looking for love, just people with rare blood types and tech-mod compatible implants.’ So I was like say less.”

Cash blinked.

“You got us a prenatal specialist from a hookup app?”

“Platonically,” Ricardo clarified.

“That doesn’t make it less weird!” Kale snapped.

The bunker was in Tulsa Hills.

Looked like a shipping container had eaten a junkyard, then tried to pretend it was a medical facility.

Inside, there were plants growing in old CPUs, a cat wearing goggles, and a mounted fish singing “Hurt” by Nine Inch Nails.

The guy’s name was Dr. Nix.

He wore a kimono.

One lens over his eye.

The other eye had no iris — just swirling black like it had forgotten how to human.

“You’re the pink one,” he said to me.

I nodded, clutching the front of my hoodie.

“Lay back. Let’s find out what the intergalactic uterus fairy left you with.”

The tests took thirty minutes.

A scan. A blood pull. A series of old-school metal tuning forks.

Xero held my hand the entire time. Silent. But there.

Then Dr. Nix showed us the screen.

And my breath stopped.

“Based on cranial density and spinal ossification...

Plus these waveforms?”

“Yeah. You’re thirty-one weeks along.”

“But I was seven like ten days ago—”

“Yup. Baby’s cooking on cheat codes.”

He lit a vape shaped like a baby bottle.

“V27 is accelerating mitosis and immune integration on a scale I’ve never seen”

Good news: baby’s healthy.

Bad news: your pregnancy's on godspeed mode. You're due in four weeks. Maybe less."

I didn't cry.

Not immediately.

I just sat there, nodding.

Trying to hold everything together while my body didn't listen.

Xero pulled me close as Nix wandered off to argue with the singing fish.

He wrapped both arms around me. Forehead to forehead.

"Whatever happens," he said, "you're not doing it alone."

"I don't even know if it's human."

"It's ours. That's what matters."

I finally let myself break a little.

Cried into his shoulder.

He didn't flinch.

He held me tighter.

Like if he could just hold hard enough, he could pause time.

We got home around 3AM.

Karyna passed out with her hoodie half-off and a half-eaten pickle in her hand. Her belly had grown again.

I watched her breathe for twenty minutes before I joined the rest of them in the war room.

Cash had blueprints up.

Not schematics — blueprints.

For a baby helmet.

"It's fully modular," he said, pointing at the screen.

“Shock-absorbent. HUD-ready. Might be overkill, but I figured if it gets into a shootout before it learns object permanence—”

“Are you okay?” Michael asked.

“Am I ever?” Cash replied.

Kale was pacing like a caged weasel.

“I say we build a training obstacle course. Baby’s gonna come out half-cybernetic, yeah? Let’s lean into it. Crawling drills. Reflex gauntlet. Foam knives.”

“Why foam?” Trent asked, peeling glue off his fingers.

“It’s a baby, Trent.”

“Right. But a super baby. You said it might have ESP or armor skin.”

“That doesn’t mean it can dodge drywall.”

Michael held up a onesie he found at the thrift store.

It read:

“I <3 Chaos”

with a little grenade printed on the front.

“Think it’ll fit?”

“It’s size 6-9 months,” Cash said.

“So like, next week, maybe.”

Ricardo walked in carrying a bucket of ice.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“Gonna chill the placenta, bro. You can make vitamin capsules. That’s a real thing.”

“Don’t you dare.”

I didn’t laugh.

Not really.

But I didn’t stop them, either.

Because this? This was love.

In its most broken, glue-huffing, mismatched form.

They didn't know what to do. None of us did.

But we were doing it together.

And as insane as it all was...

It was the first time I felt like I had a future.

I woke up sweaty and half-starved, the glow from my belly-pink shard lighting up the bedroom like a nightlight made of regret and hormonal imbalance.

Xero was curled against me like a human heating pad, one arm over my stomach like he was afraid it'd leave if he let go.

I untangled myself gently, tossed on his hoodie, and stepped out into the hallway.

The house reeked of vodka and instant noodles.

The war room lights were low.

Cash, Kale, Trent, and Ricardo were eating out of the same bowl, trading a spoon like degenerates.

"I'm telling you," Kale muttered. "Kevlarious is a strong name."

"That's not even a word," Trent said, slurring.

"We should call it Havoc. Like the energy it brings."

"Or just Ravioli," Ricardo said, licking the spoon.

"Because it's soft and full of mystery."

"You're all drunk." Cash sighed.

"And no one is naming her after tactical gear or pasta."

I didn't go in.

Just stood outside on the metal fire escape, barefoot on cold rust, watching the moon hang like an eyeball over Tulsa.

Didn't cry.

Didn't talk.

Just stood there.

Then I heard the door creak open behind me.

Michael stepped out, holding a half-empty bottle and a slouch in his shoulders.

“You good?”

“Define good.”

“Not currently puking or crying.”

“Then yeah. I’m awesome.”

He sat beside me, both of us staring into the night.

“They love you,” he said. “Even if they’re morons.”

“They love the idea of me. I don’t think anyone here knows what the hell is happening inside me. I don’t know what’s happening inside me.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Why?”

He took a sip, then passed the bottle to me.

“Because no matter what it is... you’re still you. That’s what we’re here for.”

I didn’t drink.

But I held the bottle in my lap.

“What if I mess this up, Mike? What if I’m not just the carrier – what if I’m the first mistake?”

“Then we ride that mistake into legend.”

I finally smiled.

Not because it was comforting.

But because I believed him.

Even if the world ended tomorrow, the Goons would go out laughing, screaming, and probably still fighting over what to name my uterus.

The morning sun slashed through the curtains like a nosy ex.

Xero was already halfway awake, arm curled around my waist, nose in my hair.

“You good?” he whispered, sleep still in his voice.

“Good?” I murmured, flipping over to face him.

“Baby, I’m feral.”

There was no more talking after that.

There was just his mouth on my collarbone, my fingers clawing through his bleached blonde hair, a knee on the wall, both of us nude, embraced under the blanket.

Halfway through, Xero paused, forehead on mine, out of breath.

“Think they can hear us?”

“Oh,” I gasped, grinning wide.

“They’re hearing all of it.”

Cut to: Outside the Room

Trent had his ear pressed to the door, eyes wide.

“I think she just said ‘turn the baby into a weapon.’”

Ricardo stood nearby pouring gasoline into his ear with a funnel.

“Can’t hear trauma if there’s no surviving eardrum, bro.”

Cash sat on the couch wearing headphones, blasting Ice N9ne Po\$\$e at full volume, eyes dead inside.

“I liked you, Karyna,” he said flatly.

“I defended you.”

Michael had Kale in a headlock over the toilet, repeatedly flushing as Kale screamed through the bowl. “MAKE THEM STOPPPPP.”

“IT’S THE SOUND OF LOVE, KAALE,” Michael yelled back, weeping.

Back in the room, I bit Xero’s neck.

He flinched. Moaned.

“They’re never gonna forgive us.”

“Good,” I said.

“Let them suffer.”

Outside the room, Trent collapsed against the wall.

“I’m not even mad anymore. I’m just different now.”

Ricardo was now trying to light the funnel.

When it was over — or at least paused — I threw on one of Xero’s shirts and opened the door.

The hallway was silent.

All five Goonz were sprawled out like trauma victims after a sonic boom.

“Next time,” I said cheerfully,

“We’ll try to keep the noise down.”

Michael raised one trembling hand.

“Much appreciated.”

Dad, Diapers & Death

I came armed with a list.

A real list.

Cash wrote it on an old napkin, folded five times, and underlined “PRENATAL” six times like I was going to forget that I was shopping for a speed-mutating shard baby.

Inside SupernovaMart, the lighting was artificial godlight, and the aisles smelled like expired meat and lemon bleach.

Half the shelves were selling weapons.

The other half were selling baby wipes and energy drinks.

It was perfect.

“Formula, two kinds,” I muttered to myself.

“Diapers, unscented. Canned curry for Ricardo. Red Lego kit. Monkey masks. Ground beef. Battery packs. Don’t forget the prenatal—”

That’s when I heard it.

“Hey, ain’t that the shard bitch’s boytoy?”

Three of them.

One with a gold tooth shaped like a cross.

One wearing no shirt but three chains.

And one with my name tattooed wrong on his neck. “Zaro.”

Idiots.

“Heyyyy, Zaro,” said shirtless, cracking his neck.

“Heard you play house now. Feeding her belly and everything.”

“Yeah,” I said, dropping a can of chili into my basket.

“We’re thinking of naming the kid ‘Voodoo Killer.’ You like it?”

They moved in fast.

But I was faster.

First guy got a hardback copy of Baby's First Year slammed into his face.

Second guy tried to reach for something — I assumed a gun — but I wrapped a dog leash around his arm and flung him into the diaper endcap like a ragdoll.

Third guy pulled a knife.

I pulled a 40oz bottle of baby shampoo.

It burst in his face like a pink chemical volcano, and he screamed, slipping on the linoleum.

The whole fight took maybe twenty-five seconds.

A toddler watching from a shopping cart clapped.

I bowed.

Then grabbed two of the monkey masks from the Halloween aisle and tossed it into the cart.

“Kale's Legos... Kale's Legos...”

I found a clearance box of Space Command Delta™ sets and dumped the biggest one into the cart.

I paused.

Then grabbed two.

By the time I got to self-checkout, I'd added frozen taquitos, one of those long body pillows shaped like a raccoon, and a six-pack of cheap beer.

The Voodoos were still groaning in aisle 7.

As I scanned the baby bottle sterilizer, I heard myself mutter:

“This is the dumbest mission I've ever loved.”

And I meant it.

I was loading the van one bag at a time.

Cans of soup.

Two tubs of peanut butter.

A whole crate of prenatal supplements I found in the back of the clearance fridge.

I was almost done when I saw the reflection in the rear window.

Three men.

Black jackets. Augmented arms. Clean haircuts, dead eyes.

Veroguards.

The first guy flanked right — hand already on a hip holster.

The second went wide behind a line of abandoned carts.

The third just walked toward me, calm as a pastor with bad news.

“Kazakov,” he said.

“You’re not walking away this time.”

I sighed and closed the trunk slowly.

“Can we not do this in the diaper aisle of real life?”

He raised his pistol.

I kicked the shopping cart into his knees and caught his wrist with the edge of the trunk door.

Crunch.

Gun down. Elbow snapped. He screamed.

I threw a jug of baby formula into the second one’s face like a calcium grenade.

He tripped over a stray ride-on scooter and cracked his head on the pavement.

The third one lunged — big cybernetic arms, moving fast.

But I grabbed the handle of another cart, used it as a ram and pinned him against a parked minivan.

Then I slammed the door shut on his knee. Once. Twice. Snap.

He dropped.

I stood over him, breathing steady.

“You’re not Veroguards. You’re errand boys with cybernetics.”

The guy bled through his teeth, snarling.

“You’ll never outrun what’s coming.”

I crouched and pulled a monkey mask from a grocery bag.

Shoved it onto his head.

“Then make sure you die funny.”

I got back in the van, cranked the ignition, and let the radio come on:

“Who Let the Dogs Out”

Of course.

As I peeled out, I texted the group chat:

Xero: Got groceries. Also broke three legs. Also got Legos.

Karyna: You’re amazing.

Ricardo: Get juice???

Kale: If my Lego set is missing ONE PIECE I’ll assume you died in vain.

I drove home smiling.

Fatherhood, Goon-style.

I was five blocks from Cherry Street.

Right lane.

Half a tank.

Radio low.

Mind on Karyna’s face when I hand her the prenatal kit and say, “We’re fine.”

That’s when I noticed the SUV behind me.

Chrome grill. Purple underglow. Ice N9ne’s signature stupid skull decal grinning across the hood.

“Of course.”

I took a left across two lanes.

The SUV followed.

I took a right past an old blood bank.

It followed. Faster.

Lights weren't flashing. But the music was deafening.

Bass shook my mirrors.

“Really doing this with the beef stroganoff in the back, huh?”

The first shot missed my mirror by inches.

I floored it.

My van — our van — wasn't built for speed.

But I'd tuned the throttle. Michael had reinforced the frame. Kale had... glued anime stickers to the dashboard.

It screamed to life.

The SUV pulled up alongside.

Passenger leaned out, silver pistol in hand.

I jerked the wheel hard right — scraping a mail drop box.

He lost balance, clutched the roof, fired wildly.

A bullet popped my rear tire — but didn't slow me.

I hit an alley.

Sharp left.

Right again.

Narrow turn between a laundromat and a neon-lit sex mech repair shop.

SUV clipped a dumpster and spun out.

They were still on me.

And then came the sirens.

Two police cruisers behind us — real lawboys, city crest and all.

“Perfect. Tulsa PD. Which means everyone dies equally now.”

I tapped the drift brakes.

Slid into oncoming traffic.

Weaved through a taco truck and a street vendor cart.

One of the cruisers clipped a light pole and exploded into a billboard.

The SUV swerved. Lost momentum.

I yanked the wheel into a parking garage.

Sped through the first level, popped a ramp, killed the lights.

I stopped.

Killed the engine.

Waited.

Silence.

I exhaled slow.

Groceries still in the trunk.

Legos unshaken.

Monkey mask still smiling in the passenger seat.

I looked up through the rearview.

The skyline shimmered — neon and concrete and distant sirens.

“Not today, assholes.”

“Get the worms,” I muttered.

“Then home.”

It was a hole-in-the-wall gas station on 12th and Houston.

Flickering lights. Buzzing cooler.

A wall of off-brand soda and beef jerky.

I grabbed a pack of Nuclear Noodles™ Sour Worms off the rack and got in line behind a guy buying vape cartridges and scratchers.

That’s when the door slammed open.

Two men.

One holding a sawed-off. The other, a stun baton.

Ski masks. Bad boots. Dumber eyes.

“EVERYBODY ON THE GROUND!”

The cashier froze.

The vape guy screamed and fell down way too hard. Probably fake.

The guy with the stun baton yelled again:

“MONEY. NOW.”

I reached into my hoodie.

Thirty seconds later:

The guy with the sawed-off was zip-tied to a dumpster out front.

The guy with the stun baton was hanging by his pants from a bike rack.

His legs kicked feebly. He kept yelling something about “this not being fair.”

I dropped a \$10 bill on the counter.

“Keep the change.”

The cashier nodded slowly, eyes wide.

“Who... who are you?”

I held up the worms.

“Just a guy with a pregnant girlfriend and a very loud household.”

Back in the van.

Seatbelt clicked. Engine humming.

I unwrapped the candy, tossed one in my mouth, and muttered:

“Worth it.”

I pulled into the driveway.

The front porch light flickered like someone had tried to stab it. The sound of Ricardo beatboxing dubstep poorly echoed through the walls.

Home.

I opened the van’s sliding door and grabbed the first load.

Groceries.

Two giant Lego boxes.

Candy.

A bottle of prenatal chewables that jingled like a maraca.

Monkey mask.

By the time I reached the front steps, they were already waiting.

“HE LIIIIIVES!” Michael yelled, throwing the door open in full cowboy boots and a sleeveless kimono.

“Did you get the juice?” Cash called from the couch without looking up from a drone controller.

“Where’s my Lego?” Kale demanded, arms folded like a sulking anime villain.

“Did you get chips?” Trent asked.

“No,” I said, brushing past him.

“Fair,” he replied, and wandered away.

I barely made it five feet inside before the bags were stripped from my arms.

It was a feeding frenzy. Cartons of food flying, someone yelling “IS THIS GOAT CHEESE?!” the monkey mask already on Ricardo’s face and him sprinting in circles like it gave him powers.

Then I saw her.

Karyna. Sitting on the war room couch in one of my hoodies, belly a little more obvious now, hair up, eyes lighting up the moment she saw me.

“You got ‘em?”

I pulled the candy bag from my hoodie pocket like it was a sacred artifact.

“Nuclear Noodles Sour Worms,” I said.

“One cashier, two armed idiots, three near-deaths. Worth it?”

She stood. Came over. Took the bag from my hand and then cupped my face with both palms like I was made of something precious.

“You,” she whispered,

“Are so getting laid tonight.”

Then she kissed me — slow and sweet — candy crinkling between us.

Behind us, someone gagged.

“OH COME ON,” Kale yelled, clutching the Lego set like it was his child.

“CAN WE HAVE ONE DAY WITHOUT TONGUE STUFF IN SHARED SPACES?!”

Michael fake-wept into a head of lettuce.

Cash was filming.

Ricardo was screaming through the monkey mask:

“THE BABY’S GONNA COME OUT TASTING LIKE WORM CANDYYYY—”

We sat down on the couch. She opened the bag. Popped a worm into her mouth. Offered me one.

I took it.

Our knees touched. Our breath calmed.

Chaos surrounded us — but she leaned her head on my shoulder like it was the only place that mattered.

“You did good, daddy,” she said through a mouthful of sour.

“Trying,” I murmured.

And for a second, the world was just us.

A girl, a guy, a mutant baby, and an army of idiots with snack food.

Goon Baby BBQ

I was thirty-two days into pregnancy and six minutes into getting barbecued by the Oklahoma sun.

“This baby better come out with grill marks,” I muttered.

“What?” Kale asked, shirtless, apron on, tong-flipping a half rack of ribs like it owed him rent.

“Nothing.”

The backyard of the House of Hoodlums looked like a military surplus yard had sex with a frat house.

There was a balloon arch made of salvaged drone parts.

The gifts were wrapped in cybernetic packaging foam.

Someone — Michael — brought a blowtorch instead of a lighter for the coals.

“IT’S FASTER,” he yelled over EDM remixes of baby lullabies.

Cash had printed a “Goon Baby Loading...” onesie that was already too small.

Trent showed up in a cowboy hat and a diaper. I did not ask.

“Can we talk about how y’all threw a baby shower four days after crucifying a Voodoo captain to a billboard?” I said.

“Balance,” Xero replied, holding my hand and sipping lemonade like a suburban dad.

That’s when we heard the fence creak.

Ricardo looked over, chewing a sausage on a stick.

“Uh. We got company.”

Six people were at the gate. Dirty clothes, ratty hair, homemade weapons.

One had a Target shopping cart with a nailed baseball bat in it.

The leader held up a printout of our wanted poster.

Laminated.

Folded.

Held together with duct tape and delusion.

“We claim the bounty!” she shouted.

“Give up peacefully and we won’t hurt the pregnant one!”

Trent leaned back in his lawn chair.

“Did she just say we won’t get hurt?”

Nobody moved.

Kale looked at me. I looked at Xero. Xero looked at the hot dogs.

Michael sipped from a beer can with two cigarette butts floating in it.

Ricardo licked ketchup off his fingers.

Cash reached over and locked the gate.

Click.

We all sat back down.

“Y’all serious?” one of them asked.

“We got crowbars.”

“Cool,” I said.

“We got smokies.”

Thirty minutes later, the unhoused bounty crew had left.

One of them took a paper plate of food with them.

They didn’t even say thank you.

“I feel very safe,” I told Xero.

“You should. No one survives the Goon Baby BBQ.”

I kissed his cheek, then paused.

“Where’s Trent?”

We turned.

He was in a baby pool, drinking from a boot.

“Let’s open the trash,” Michael announced, clapping his hands.

“I mean gifts.”

There were nine boxes.

Two had actual wrapping paper.

One was wrapped in a police citation.

One was a diaper, taped shut.

Trent brought his own diaper as his gift and I told him never to speak again.

We sat on a beaten couch dragged into the backyard.

Xero sat next to me, hand on my thigh.

His smile was small. Soft.

That alone made me want to cry.

“Start with mine,” Kale said.

It was a steel case labeled “TACTICAL INFANT COMBAT PACK.”

Inside:

- Three baby beanies with the Goonz insignia
- A plastic knife (“for teething and intimidation”)
- A pair of baby aviators
- And a bib that said “COOMING SOON”

“You misspelled coming,” I said.

“No I didn’t,” Kale replied proudly.

Ricardo gave us a deflated beach ball and a single sock.

Said it was for “emotional enrichment.”

I didn’t ask.

Cash handed me a box with foam armor plating.

Custom fitted. Baby sized.

“Figured we’d start ‘em early,” he shrugged.

“Goon Baby gonna roll into pre-K strapped.”

Michael’s gift was a plastic steering wheel duct-taped to a helmet.

“So they can drive before they walk.”

“This is just a Happy Meal toy.”

“But it’s got dreams.”

Then came Xero’s.

It wasn’t wrapped.

Just a small folded hoodie.

Black. Soft. Hand-stitched letters across the front:

“LIL KAZ.”

“I didn’t know if we’d name them that,” he said quietly. “But... felt right.”

Silence.

No one made a joke.

Even Trent stopped drinking pool water.

I touched the hoodie.

Then touched his hand.

And for the first time in what felt like forever,

I didn’t feel scared. Or wrong. Or like I didn’t belong.

Just warm.

“We’re gonna suck at this,” I whispered.

“Yeah,” he said.

“But it’ll be our kind of suck.”

Cash lit sparklers.

Michael started crying.

Kale grilled an entire cabbage for some reason.

Ricardo got stuck in a folding chair.

And I smiled.

Because this is what it meant to have a family.

I escaped the yard during Michael's spoken word poem about Kale's nipples.

(They rhyme with "cripples." Don't ask.)

The sun was sinking.

The air smelled like grill smoke and melted soda.

My ankles were swollen.

I'd cried twice.

Once was happy.

The other was Kale's cabbage.

I sat on the back porch steps.

Michael joined me first, handing me a Capri Sun spiked with vodka.

"So," he said, "you're having a literal Goon Baby. That's wild."

"Apparently," I replied.

"Surprise uterus questline."

Cash walked up next, plopped down beside me.

Crumpled chip bag in hand.

Immediately stole my Capri Sun.

There was silence.

The good kind.

Then... not.

"You ever think about not doing missions anymore?" Cash asked.

“No.”

“Maybe you should.”

I blinked.

Michael scratched his arm, suddenly real interested in the gravel.

“We’re not saying you can’t hang,” he said.

“Just... you’re built different now. Like... more fragile but still terrifying?”

“Like a really angry swan with bad ankles,” Cash added.

“Wow,” I muttered.

“So poetic.”

Michael nudged my shoulder.

“We just don’t want you out there with, y’know... every gang in Tulsa trying to yeet your unborn.”

“You’re still our Karyna,” Cash said.

“Still home.”

“Even if you go full soccer mom with knives.”

I didn’t say anything at first.

Didn’t know how.

The idea of not being on the front lines was...

Scary.

Alien.

Sad.

But the idea of leaving them was worse.

“So what, I sit around and make snacks?” I said.

“I mean, yeah,” Cash shrugged.

“But like, booby-trapped snacks.”

“And you still get to slap Trent.”

“And you can train Lil Kaz to curse in Russian and shoot Nerf darts.”

I smiled.

Soft. Bitter. Real.

“Okay,” I said.

“But if y’all die on a mission, I’m resurrecting you just to kill you again.”

“That’s our girl,” Michael said, slinging an arm over my shoulder.

“Now give me back my Capri Sun, bitch.”

The House of Hoodlums was snoring.

Like... collectively.

Someone — probably Ricardo — was whimpering in his sleep.

Someone else was watching an action movie at full volume.

Michael was talking in his sleep again.

(“Tell the lobster man he’s not my real dad...”)

I needed air.

So I grabbed Xero’s hoodie, waddled past the scattered bodies, and stepped outside.

He was already there.

Sitting on the broken swing in the backyard.

Head tilted back.

Eyes on the stars.

“You hiding from the baby?” I asked.

“It’s not even born yet,” he replied.

“And somehow it’s already louder than Trent.”

I dropped into his lap sideways.

The swing creaked beneath us.

He wrapped his arms around me.

I buried my face in his neck.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I whispered.

“Same.”

We were quiet a long time.

“You think we’re gonna ruin it?” I asked.

“Like... raise a little war criminal or something?”

“Probably,” he said.

“But at least they’ll be funny.”

I laughed into his hoodie.

“I used to think I’d die in a bathroom stall with a pack of smokes and a blood debt. Now I’m worried about diaper brands.”

“Welcome to the fall,” he said.

“It’s a soft landing when someone’s holding you.”

He kissed the top of my head.

I gripped his shirt tighter.

Because I wasn’t just scared of raising a kid.

I was scared of losing this.

Him.

Them.

This stupid, violent, miraculous family we built.

“I love you,” I said.

He didn’t say it back.

He squeezed me tighter.

And that was louder.

Heavier.

Better.

The wind picked up.

The swing creaked.

The stars didn't care.

But we did.

And that was enough.

The house creaked like it was breathing.

Everyone was asleep.

Or at least... not loud.

Which was close enough.

I couldn't sleep.

My back ached. My feet itched.

And the baby — Lil Kaz, Lil Doomspawn, Goonlet Supreme — was doing somersaults in my guts.

I went out to the roof.

Ricardo was already there, sitting cross-legged, eating sour gummy worms with a fork.

"You're real weird," I said, settling beside him.

"You're real pregnant."

He didn't look at me when he spoke next.

"You were 13," he said.

"Wearing white scrubs and slippers. and I was riding a tricycle drunk."

I blinked.

"Was that really our meet cute?"

"Swear to god."

He smiled, but it wasn't his usual gremlin smile.

It was quiet.

"You looked lost, scared, brought you here, home," he continued.

I felt my throat tighten.

"Didn't think you'd remember all that."

"I remember everything about you," he said.

"Watched you go from little grifter gremlin to queen of chaos."

"Now you're about to be somebody's entire galaxy. That's... heavy, y'know?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

"People think I'm the heart of this crew," he said.

"But you? You've always been the soul. You kept us from eating each other alive."

"Literally. Kale tried once."

"Exactly."

He reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a tiny plush shark keychain.

Faded. Stitched. One eye missing.

"You dropped this when I found you."

He handed it to me.

I held it in my hands, speechless.

"You gave it a name back then," he said.

"Said it protected you from nightmares."

"Yeah," I whispered.

"His name's Stabby."

We both laughed.

And for a moment, it wasn't about war or bounty hunters or black-ops corporations.

It was just a rooftop, a plastic shark, and someone who saw me grow into someone I hadn't even realized I'd become.

"Thanks, Rico," I said.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said.

“I’m still legally not allowed near hospitals. So delivery day’s gonna get weird.”

The First Cry

I was tucked up against him.

The house was still.

His arm curled around my waist, hand over the bump.

Then I heard it. Felt it.

“Mama.”

Not in words exactly.

Not in a voice.

But through my spine, my teeth, my blood.

A neon-pink static. Like emotion wrapped in electricity.

And he heard it too.

Xero shot upright, eyes wide, hair everywhere.

“...you heard that, right?”

“Yep.”

“You sure it wasn’t gas?”

“Nope. It’s time.”

[Cue chaos.]

“KALE GET THE VAN.”

“WE DON’T HAVE A VAN, YOU STOLE THE VAN.”

“MICHAEL GET THE VAN.”

“I AM NAKED.”

Cash kicked down the bathroom door with a towel still around his neck.

“BABY TIME?”

“YES.”

“I’LL GET THE BAGS.”

Ricardo threw on a poncho and started crying.

Trent was yelling something about boiling water like it was the 1800s.

Somehow, some way, we made it to the Tulsa TechMedical Sprawl Unit 6 – which looked like a Blade Runner Apple Store.

They admitted me immediately when my stomach glowed.

“That’s the V27 implant,” I mumbled.

“It’s interfacing with the fetus’ autonomic—AHHHHHHHH MY SPINE IS MELTING.”

Xero never let go of my hand.

Not when the monitors screamed.

Not when the walls turned red.

Not when I screamed louder than a flamethrower at a concert.

He kissed my temple and whispered,

“It’s okay. He’s almost here.”

And then...

I don’t remember the pain.

I don’t remember the sweat.

I remember his cry.

Loud. Clear. Serrated.

Like the world had just been stabbed into motion.

They handed him to me.

And I cried so hard I scared the nurse.

“Name?” she asked.

I looked at Xero. He was crying too.

“Kaz Viktorovich Vladislav,” I said.

“But... we’ll probably just call him Stabby.”

There was yelling down the corridor.

“WE’RE HERE FOR THE STAB BABY.”

“HIS NAME ISN’T STAB BABY, YOU GUTTER FUNGUS—”

“SHUT UP KALE, IT’S A GOOD NAME.”

A nurse peered into the room, dazed.

“Um... are you expecting five... armed men covered in tattoos, marker and glitter?”

“Yes,” I said. “Unfortunately.”

They burst in like a failed improv troupe.

Ricardo tripped over a stool and crawled the last three feet to the crib.

Cash had a balloon that said “Congrats on Your New Toaster.”

He shrugged.

“It was on sale.”

Michael wore sunglasses inside and looked visibly terrified.

Trent carried a rubber chicken and a pack of discount fireworks.

“For baby stimulation.”

“Don’t. You. Dare,” I said.

Kale stood back, arms crossed, trying to look tough.

Then the baby squeaked.

Kale’s face melted.

He actually squealed.

“He has a fist. That’s good. That’s combat ready.”

“He’s a baby,” I said.

“A warrior baby.”

Xero stood beside me, arms gently wrapped around my shoulder.

The pink glow under our skin pulsed slowly, peacefully.

“You sure about this?” he whispered.

“Nope.”

“Same.”

“But he’s ours.”

Michael finally approached the crib.

“I once killed a guy with a bottle opener,” he said solemnly.

“Thanks, Mike.”

“Just saying. He’s gonna hear worse.”

Cash looked at the baby. Then at me.

“So... we’re a family now?”

“We always were,” I said.

“But now we have diapers.”

Stabby opened one eye. Looked directly at Trent.

Trent screamed.

Ricardo fainted.

“Powerful aura,” Trent muttered. “I’m naming my next rash after him.”

I looked at all of them — these clowns, these monsters, these men who once kidnapped a priest for a better hiding spot.

And I said,

“Meet your nephew.”

They all went silent.

Even Kale.

Xero kissed the side of my head. The baby gripped his pinkie like a vice.

And in that moment, for the first time in years, no one needed to say anything.

The floor smelled like clean plastic and instant pudding.

Xero was holding Kaz — Stabby, whatever we were calling him officially — and Kale was mumbling something about “head circumference indicating warrior lineage.”

Michael had just shoved a juice box into Ricardo’s hands like he was a toddler.

It was one of those rare moments.

Safe.

Too quiet.

And then... even quieter.

The lights above flickered. Once. Then again.

A soft pop in the distance. Then another.

Not electrical.

“Guns,” Xero muttered.

Cash stood straight.

“Too small for rifles. Submachine fire. Controlled bursts.”

Trent dropped the rubber chicken.

“...Did someone just get quietly murdered?”

Kale was already at the door, peeking into the hallway.

Then he froze.

Then he backed away slowly.

“They’re here,” he whispered.

I didn't ask who.

We already knew.

The intercom buzzed — then fizzled into static.

Every patient monitor glitched at once, flashing seizure-inducing red before going dark.

Outside the door, a woman screamed.

It didn't last long.

"They're sweeping floor by floor," Cash said.

"Clearing rooms. No survivors."

"Cops?" I asked.

"Worse," said Xero, handing me the baby. "Private sector."

Kale was breathing hard, muttering a prayer under his breath.

Michael grabbed Ricardo by the collar.

"You still got your contacts in ER maintenance?"

"I dated a janitor once, does that count?"

"Lead the way, Rat Pope."

Cash pulled a collapsible baton from his coat.

"We need to split," he said. "Evac pattern Red-2. Two fronts."

"I'm not leaving her," Xero said.

"No one said you were, love-bird," Cash muttered. "Just don't get dead."

I clutched Kaz to my chest. His little hand clamped my shirt.

"You okay, baby?" I whispered.

And in the softest hum through my ribs, I felt him answer.

"Run."

We moved fast, and quiet.

Ricardo led us through a narrow stairwell that smelled like bleach and ghosts.

Kaz clung to me silently—no crying, no fuss.

He just knew. Somehow.

“Janitor I used to bang showed me this,” Ricardo whispered, pushing a utility door. “Before she tried to choke me with a vacuum cord. Long story.”

We slipped through the staff corridor, past outdated vending machines and racks of unused crutches. The world narrowed to hallway echoes and the squeak of our shoes.

“Two more lefts, then tunnel access,” Cash whispered.

“Goon tunnel or hospital tunnel?” Kale asked.

“The one that doesn’t lead to death in a gift shop.”

Then it happened.

I was just behind Xero.

Kaz wrapped in my hoodie, his soft breathing against my collarbone.

I turned the corner—and there he was.

A black-clad soldier. Helmet. Visor.

Strike team. Fully geared. Finger already on his trigger.

His head tilted slightly, just enough to register:

“Target sighted.”

His rifle came up.

My body froze. My legs didn’t know what to do.

And then — no gunfire.

Just a snap.

Xero came out of the dark like a wraith.

One arm hooked under the soldier’s chin, the other locked around the helmet.

They crashed against the wall — hard.

The soldier clawed at him, boots scraping tiles.

Kaz whimpered once.

I watched as Xero’s grip tightened. The strike trooper’s legs kicked once... twice... then nothing.

A long silence.

Then the soft clatter of the body slumping.

Xero crouched, checked the sidearm holster.

Pistol. Loaded. Two extra mags.

“You okay?” he asked me, eyes still locked on the body.

I nodded slowly.

“I froze.”

“You didn’t drop him,” Xero said.

“That matters.”

The others caught up behind us.

Michael glanced down.

“Well damn, Xero. That was quiet.”

Cash took the sidearm, checked the make.

“Custom grip. Verogon issue.”

“So they really want you two dead,” Michael said.

“Or they really want the baby,” Kale added, still staring at the corpse.

Ricardo picked up the guy’s helmet.

“Souvenir?”

“Ric,” I groaned.

“Kidding. Unless it fits.”

Xero slipped his arm around my waist again.

He didn’t say anything else.

Just held me steady as we kept moving.

And I held Kaz closer than I ever had.

Fifteen.

That was the first thing I counted when we crept up behind the vending machines lining the west end of the hospital lobby.

Fifteen fully geared Verogon shocktroopers, in position, trigger-ready, scanning every hallway, every door.

Kaz squirmed against my chest. His heartbeat synced with mine — both loud, fast, and terrified.

Xero ducked beside me.

He had the stolen sidearm. Kale was next to him, cracking his neck like it was fight night.

“How many mags?” Kale whispered.

“Two.”

“You aim low, I aim angry?”

They fist bumped without a word.

Ricardo poked his head out from behind a wheelchair ramp.

“Why do they all look like they hate their dads?”

Cash shoved a crash cart into his hands.

“Use this as cover and shut the hell up.”

Michael loaded up a laundry bin with defibrillators, bedpans, and IV poles.

“We’re improvising?”

“We’re Gooning,” said Trent, then tripped over a therapy ball.

Kale moved first — no hesitation.

He launched himself straight down the west flank like a cybernetic linebacker, shoulder-checked a guard into a potted plant, and screamed:

“MY NAME IS KALE AND I DO NOT REQUIRE A LAST NAME.”

Then all hell broke loose.

Michael chucked a prosthetic leg like a javelin. It cracked a face shield.

Cash hotwired a heart monitor cart and sent it flying — sparking and beeping as it skidded across the tiles and exploded into a mop bucket.

Ricardo cackled as he chucked cafeteria trays like shurikens.

Trent screamed, “WITNESS ME,” and flung a CPR dummy like a battering ram.

Kale was punching a guy so hard his helmet spun around like a salad spinner.

Xero dropped three guards with headshots so fast I barely saw him aim.

A bullet grazed my arm. I bit my tongue. Didn’t cry out.

Kaz didn’t cry either.

He just glowed. Faint and pink and calm.

We crashed through the side exit, alarms howling behind us, red lights cutting through the night air.

Michael yanked open the side door of a parked medical van.

“IN. IN. IN. IN.”

Ricardo dove in headfirst, screaming,

“I REGRET NOTHING.”

Cash hurled a rolling IV rack inside after him.

Xero lifted me up, one hand on my back, the other still holding the pistol.

“Drive!” he barked.

Kale dropkicked the last guard in the face and swan-dived into the van face first.

Michael slammed the door shut.

The tires squealed.

We were gone.

Behind us, the hospital burned.

And Kaz... finally made a sound.

A tiny coo.

And a spark of light.

Michael was white-knuckling the wheel like he was trying to kill the asphalt.

Cash had both palms pressed on Kale's chest, trying to stop the bleeding.

"He's been quiet too long," Ricardo muttered.

"Trent, hand me gauze," Cash barked.

"I gave it to Kale," Trent said weakly.

"HE'S BLEEDING FROM EVERYWHERE."

I knelt beside him.

Kale was slumped against the van wall, blood dark and soaking through his green tank top.

He blinked slow. Pupils like pinholes.

His bald head was slick with sweat and something redder.

"Kale—stay with us, man."

"Hey," he whispered, "I won that fight back there, yeah?"

"You dropkicked a guy in the face, I'm pretty sure that counts."

He grinned. Teeth pink.

His breath stuttered.

Karyna had the baby clutched to her chest across from us, silent tears painting her cheeks.

Stabby didn't cry.

Even he knew.

Cash looked at me.

"He's crashing."

"I know."

Kale's fingers twitched.

He grabbed my jacket. Pulled me in.

"You listenin'?"

"Always."

"You gotta keep 'em safe. You, Mike, all of you. But especially..."

His eyes flicked past me to Karyna.

“Her. And that little pink gremlin.”

His breathing hitched.

I put my hand on his.

“I got you. I promise.”

“Good. ‘Cause I’m... I’m so bad at feelings, man.”

The van hit a bump.

Kale didn’t move.

Cash pressed down harder.

“C’mon, man—talk shit. Tell us we’re dumb. Say ‘combat legs engaged’ or some shit—”

“Kale,” I whispered.

“...bro?”

He was gone.

Just like that.

No last gasp.

No heroic music.

Just the van’s rattling frame.

And the slow drip of blood onto my boots.

Michael didn’t say a word.

Trent looked away.

Ricardo wiped his nose and muttered,

“He owed me forty credits.”

We reached the house ten minutes later.

We didn’t speak.

We carried Kale in.

And we laid him on the couch he used to scream at cartoons from.

He looked... peaceful.

Which was weird.

And wrong.

I sat on the steps with my head in my hands, the taste of iron still in the back of my throat.

Inside, Karyna whispered to Kaz, her voice too cracked to sing.

Cash lit a cigarette he wouldn't smoke.

And the silence in the House of Hoodlums...

...had never been louder.

He Was The Loudest Of Us

Stabby was asleep on my chest, drooling into my hoodie, and I was covered in formula, eyeliner, and something that might've been blood or gore, I hadn't checked.

I hadn't really slept since he was born, unless you count passing out for ninety seconds with one foot still on the war room floor and a knife under my pillow.

The whole house was vibrating with funeral prep. Loud footsteps. Shovel scraping. Someone—probably Ricardo—yelling about glitter ratios.

And me?

I was pacing the hallway in a pair of canvas shoes and one of Xero's hoodies, trying to remember if I'd brushed my teeth or just hallucinated that.

Donovan Kale Bellamy.

2026 to 2057.

Died for us.

He'd been a nuisance. A brother. A wrecking ball.

He'd also been brave in the end. The kind of brave that ends in a slab of concrete and a static-choked scream over comms.

Stabby started fussing.

I bounced him once. Twice.

“Shhh,” I whispered. “We’re saying goodbye to the loud man who wanted to name you ‘Laser Vengeance.’ Remember him?”

He farted gently in response. I took it as solidarity.

I passed Trent in the hallway.

He was shirtless again, holding a guitar like he’d never been told no. Into his recorder, he muttered:

“...inspired by grief, I wrote this one in a dream about concrete rain...”

“Trent,” I hissed, rocking Stabby gently, “I swear if you weaponize Kale’s funeral for clout—”

“It’s a eulogy!”

“It’s poetry about yourself.”

Stabby hiccupped.

“You’re upsetting the baby.”

“I’m being vulnerable.”

I kicked the back of his knee and kept walking.

He fell sideways into his closet. “Ow—emotional injury!”

I didn’t stop.

In the commons, Cash was duct-taping a drone to a projector like it owed him money.

“Morning” he said without looking up. “You’re late. Also, your baby spit up on my keyboard earlier. It smells like judgment.”

“Good,” I muttered, adjusting the sling. “He learned that from me.”

Michael passed through carrying two shovels and a bottle of whiskey. He nodded once at me, once at the baby. Didn’t say a word.

That meant his grief was peaking. Michael only got that silent when someone was dead or about to be.

I pushed open the back door.

Cherry Street wind hit me like a warm slap. The smell of burnt plastic, wet grass, and someone else’s firework attempt lingered.

The old preschool playground had been retrofitted into a graveyard.

Kale's stolen coffin was perched crooked on the broken swing set, spray-painted black, and covered in duct tape roses. Glitter bones marked each corner.

Ricardo had drawn a sigil on it that pulsed faintly in the sun.

I didn't ask what it did.

There was a sticky note on the top:

Kale: Not Good, But Ours.

Stabby made a small hiccuping noise and pressed his cheek deeper into my chest.

"Yeah," I murmured, stepping outside, "you missed the yelling, baby, but you're not gonna miss this part."

The crew looked up as I crossed the backyard.

Michael jammed the shovel into dirt and wiped his hands on his jeans.

Cash hit a button and the drone buzzed to life, casting a flickering hologram of Kale mid-shout—frozen forever in that hospital hallway, mouth wide, blood on his jaw.

Ricardo stood at the foot of the grave, wearing a long cloak made of trash bags and holding a bag of funeral glitter in each hand.

"Welcome to the House of Hoodlums Memorial Service™," Cash intoned.

"Population: One less headache."

"Make it two," I muttered.

Because I was about to lose it.

And I refused to cry holding my kid.

Instead, I smiled—sharp, exhausted, mean.

"Let's get this over with before the cops show up or the baby poops again."

Ricardo was already pacing in circles, shaking a glitter bag in each hand like a rave priest warming up for spiritual nonsense.

Michael was doing that thing where he squints at the ground like he's mad it exists.

Cash had connected the drone to the projector, and now the coffin was haloed in a flickering haze of pixelated memories—Kale yelling, Kale laughing, Kale punching a soda machine because it gave him diet by mistake.

Then: static.

Then: a shot of him just before he died.

He drop kicked a Veroguard in the face

I blinked hard.

Stabby squirmed on my chest. I bounced him gently. Tried not to choke.

Trent stepped forward with his guitar.

“Okay,” he said, strumming a single out-of-tune chord. “I wrote this last night. It’s called The Sword in the Kale.”

“No,” said Cash.

Michael didn’t speak. He just picked up a wrench and tossed it at Trent’s feet.

Trent yelped and stumbled back into the fence. “I’m trying to honor him!”

“You’re trying to sample him for your terrible demo,” I muttered.

“I have a SoundCloud!”

“That’s the saddest sentence anyone has ever said at a funeral,” Cash said.

Ricardo lit both glitter bags on fire. It shouldn’t have worked, but it did.

A sparkling cloud erupted around him in a puff of chemical pink mist. He raised his arms like a glitching pope.

“Kale told me in a dream that he wanted his spirit scattered to the algorithm!” he shouted.
“So I am uploading his vibes!”

Stabby sneezed.

A breeze rolled through. The hologram of Kale flickered—mouth open, eyes wide, frozen mid-yell—and for half a second I thought he might actually speak.

He didn’t.

But the silence after was too much.

And I stepped forward.

I didn’t mean to say anything.

I wasn't planning on it.

But the second I opened my mouth, the words just fell out like knives.

"Kale was the dumbest leader I ever followed."

The crew went quiet.

Stabby hiccuped once, like a weird little emotional sonar.

I kept going.

"He was loud. He was reckless. He was bad at planning. He once tried to seduce a bounty hunter during a hostage negotiation, and got shot in the leg three times."

Ricardo nodded solemnly. "And still flirted."

"He called me 'the emotional nuke,' like it was a compliment. He—he never knew when to shut up, and half the time he took credit for plans I wrote on napkins in blood and salsa—"

My voice cracked.

Stabby wriggled.

I swallowed hard. Blinked harder.

Then I felt him.

Xero.

I didn't hear him walk up. I never did.

But he was there. Right behind me. Close but not touching.

His hand hovered for a second—then settled on my back, just below my shoulder blades.

Warm.

Real.

He didn't say anything. Of course he didn't. He didn't have to.

I leaned back, just slightly, into the weight of him. The pressure reminded me I was still in a body.

Still standing.

Still here.

I pulled a folded note from my pocket. It was crumpled and stained with something reddish-brown—ink, blood, grief, whatever. I didn't look too closely.

It was the note I wrote the night Kale died.

I miss you, asshole. You deserved better than a death that made you a good person. You deserved to be loud, and wrong, and in my face forever.

I struck a match.

The wind blew it out.

Tried again.

Failed.

Then Xero reached around me, took the matchbook from my hand, and struck one—clean, silent, and perfect.

He lit the corner of the note. Held it out.

I watched it burn.

The flames caught fast.

Ash curled upward like a reverse snowfall.

Cash didn't film. Michael didn't speak. Ricardo took off his trashbag cloak and sat cross-legged like a weird little monk.

Even Stabby was still.

For a second, it was just us.

And the fire.

And the memory of someone we'd all hated, loved, fought, and lost—all at once.

"Goodbye, Kale," I whispered.

Xero stepped closer.

His arm brushed mine.

And just under his breath, I heard him say:

"He'd have hated all this."

I smiled.

"You mean he'd be mad we made it beautiful?"

"No," Xero said, eyes fixed on the ash,

"He'd be mad he missed the party."

Baby Teeth and Blood Debts

Karyna was asleep on her side, arm curled protectively around the baby like a blade laid across a shrine.

The hoodie she wore was mine, stretched at the sleeves, stained with something pink from Ricardo's glitter bomb, and too warm for how hot the room was. She didn't care. She ran hot lately—rage, joy, milk, and post-trauma adrenaline. Her legs were tangled in the sheets like they'd been wrestling all night. They probably had.

The baby—Kaz, but we'd already started calling him Stabby—was asleep on her chest. One tiny hand clutching the collar of her hoodie, the other limp at his side like he'd just defended a kingdom and needed a juice box.

I stood in the doorway, silent, back against the frame. Watching.

Not stalking.

Not afraid.

Just taking it in.

Like a ghost trying to remember what it was like to have something to protect.

The light through the busted blinds painted stripes on her skin. Dust floated lazily in the air. Downstairs, I could hear faint thumping—Cash hitting a console. Or maybe Ricardo hitting a console because Cash hit him.

The silence up here was rare. Heavy.

I walked in slow. Each step precise. Quiet. Combat quiet, but not for combat. Just... reverence.

I sat on the edge of the bed and touched her ankle. Just barely.

She stirred. Eyes fluttered open.

She smiled before she even spoke. That always wrecked me a little.

"You're up," she whispered.

"I don't sleep much."

“You should. You’ll be grumpy and broody and emotionally constipated.”

“So... normal?”

She smirked. Then yawned, a sound that ended in a soft, breathy groan. She tilted her body, one arm securing Stabby as she slid him into my arms.

“You want the morning shift, daddy?”

“I do.”

He was warm. So small. Skin soft and red and impossibly new.

His breath hitched in his sleep. Like he was already having dreams he didn’t understand. Or maybe he was just glitching his way into life, like his parents did.

I leaned back against the headboard and held him against my chest, hand wide across his back.

He squirmed once. Let out a whimper. Settled.

“I think he likes you,” Karyna said, pulling her legs up and scooting closer until our shoulders touched.

“Dangerous taste,” I said.

She kissed my jaw. Didn’t say anything.

I hummed. Quiet. Just low enough to shake my own chest.

It was the same melody Kale used to whistle when he was bored—right before a fight. I don’t think he even knew he did it.

Karyna caught it. Her smile faded, but her eyes didn’t close.

“You miss him?”

“I do.”

“He died for us.”

“I know.”

She placed her head on my shoulder, just under Stabby.

For a few seconds, it was like we weren’t killers or runaways or test subjects or ticking time bombs.

We were parents.

Just for now.

Then the door creaked open and Michael's voice came in low:

"They're ready downstairs."

I nodded.

Karyna sat up.

She kissed the top of Stabby's head and said, "Time to ruin a corporation."

I stood, holding our son.

He blinked at me—those strange, smart eyes already too knowing—and made a noise like a question and a warning.

"We're gonna burn them all down," I told him softly.

"And then you can grow up."

The war room smelled like hot wiring, jalapeño chips, and grief no one wanted to name.

Cash sat cross-legged in his command chair, lit by nine flickering monitors and one half-functional ceiling light that pulsed like a dying firefly. His hoodie was inside out, and he was chewing on a pen like it owed him something.

He didn't look up when I entered, still holding the baby.

"Congratulations on spawning," he said flatly. "I got you a welcome-back gift."

"You blew something up without me?"

He pointed to the screen. It was a rotating 3D schematic of a glass fortress rising out of an ocean of white gridlines—like a prism grown in hell.

"The Glass Box," he said.

"Verogon's off-grid server vault. Somewhere in the Arbuckle Ruins. Unmapped terrain, EMP-shielded, six layers of biometric paranoia."

He popped a chip in his mouth and wiped his fingers on a plushie shaped like a corrupted emoji.

"And we're gonna gut it like a birthday cake."

Karyna flopped onto the busted couch, one leg slung over the backrest, still in her funeral boots.

Michael stood by the map table, arms folded, scowl loaded.

"This isn't just a flex," he said. "This is surgical destruction. They sent a squad to grab your baby, and they killed Kale to do it."

Cash nodded. “Verogon wants V27 DNA back in their vaults. They want the kid. They want you. They want everything back that escaped Project Delphi.”

He tapped a key.

The 3D model zoomed in to show interior server stacks, twitching red defense drones, and a fiber-optic spine that looked like it had teeth.

“Once we’re in, we jack the entire treasury node—forty-three billion ø—plus all classified files and backup genomes.”

“And then?” I asked.

Cash cracked his neck. “Then I detonate their history across the entire net.”

Ricardo crashed into the room with a vape in one hand and a hamster in the other.

“I brought backup.”

He held up the hamster.

The hamster blinked.

“We’re ignoring him,” Cash said without looking.

Michael jabbed a finger at the map.

“There’s a geothermal tunnel beneath the south wall,” he said. “Old maintenance shaft. Can’t be scanned. If we hit that entrance, we’ve got about seven minutes before the grid reboots and fries our signal.”

“That’s enough,” I said. “If I go in first.”

Karyna raised an eyebrow. “You’re pulling infiltration?”

“I’m quiet.”

“You’re scary quiet.”

I didn’t disagree.

Cash turned serious for a moment. His voice dropped.

“This isn’t a raid, Xero. It’s exorcism. They’re the reason you don’t have a real name anymore. They’re the reason Kale’s in a f***ing box of glitter dust. We erase them, or they keep coming.”

I looked at my son.

Tiny fists. Fast breath. Skin like a future someone tried to steal.

I nodded once.

“We’ll go loud,” I said.

“Then we’ll go silent.
Then they won’t exist.”

Cash cleared the last chip bag off the map table and used a screwdriver to point at the holographic vault projection like it was a corpse on trial.

“This,” he said, “is their heart. Their brain. Their unflushed cache.”

Michael nodded, adjusting the safety on his sidearm.

“We’re gonna be the virus.”

Everyone was here now. Even Trent, who was drinking oat milk from a canteen and pretending he wasn’t planning to livestream the heist for poetry exposure.

“Okay,” Cash said, rotating the blueprint.

“South tunnel entrance. No grid access. That’s Xero’s door.”
“Interior breach team—me and Michael. We ghost their treasury node and seed the backups with mimicry viruses.”
“Extraction: ground level roofline. Kale’s old exit plan. We’ll drop a smoke screen and bounce before sunrise.”

Ricardo raised his hand.

“Where do I go?”

Michael didn’t look up.

“Nowhere. You’re a distraction.”

Ricardo beamed.

Karyna was sitting cross-legged on the armrest of the couch, Stabby dozing against her chest. Her eyes never left the vault schematic.

“When we pull the treasury data,” she said slowly, “can you isolate Project Delphi?”

Cash nodded. “I’ve already flagged it. You want their lab notes? You’ll have them. Want their test results? Done.”

“I want their names,” she said. “Every doctor. Every researcher. Every security staffer who stood by.”

“You want revenge,” Michael said.

Karyna looked down at our son.

“No,” she said softly.

“I want memory. They tried to rewrite us. I’m writing back.”

Trent raised his hand.

“I can compose an elegy to accompany the system crash. Something... haunting. Minor key. With synth bagpipes.”

“No,” said everyone.

“Here’s what matters,” I said, stepping forward.

The room quieted.

I laid a knife on the table. It wasn’t for threats—it was just something to press my hand against while I spoke.

“This isn’t a score. This is a scar. We cut them open, and we don’t stop until they’re ash.”

Ricardo nodded solemnly. “Scar...core.”

“I hate that I like that,” muttered Cash.

I looked at each of them.

Michael. Steady. Grounded. A fist in waiting.

Cash. Genius. Glitch-brained. Already planning five steps ahead.

Ricardo. Unkillable. Feral. Probably hallucinating right now.

Trent. Useless. But enthusiastic.

Karyna. Fire. Sharp as a broken mirror. The center of everything I’d ever wanted to save.

“Gear up,” I said.

Cash clapped once.

Michael cracked his knuckles.

Karyna stood, adjusted the sling, and said:

“We don’t leave until we own them.”

The garage reeked of coolant, solder, and aftershave no one admitted to using.

Kale's old locker was open—half-empty, still full of personality. Boots with blood on them. A half-burned letter he never sent. A plastic gun he'd once tried to pass off as "experimental tech."

Karyna was bent over the bench, strapping a pulse-pistol to her thigh. Her hair was tied up with a wire band. Her shirt was faded neon—an old Verogon security uniform she'd painted FUCK YOU across in glitter glue.

"You're stalling," she said without looking up.

"No," I said, tightening the wrist guard on my arm. "I'm loading slow."

"You only load slow when you're about to say something I'll hate."

I didn't answer.

So she turned to face me, hands on her hips.

Her eyes were sharp. Familiar.

Mine dropped—just for a second—to Stabby, asleep in the little bassinet someone had bolted to a rolling toolbox. He was wrapped in Michael's old jacket and a towel that said NO GODS, NO GROOMING in cracked ink.

Karyna followed my gaze.

Then she froze.

"You're not serious."

"I am."

"You can't be."

"I am."

She crossed her arms. Stared me down.

"You want me to stay here."

"I want you alive."

"I am alive."

"I want you to stay that way."

Her mouth opened—ready for something mean, something fast—but it didn't come out.

So I kept going.

“We’re gonna be loud. It’s gonna get ugly. Cash says we’ve got seven minutes to rip out a billion-credit server before every alarm in the state goes off. There’s going to be drones. Guards. Hellhounds. Ricochet rounds. You just gave birth five days ago, Kar.”

She blinked. Her jaw tightened.

I kept my voice level. Like I was defusing something. Or setting a boundary neither of us wanted to need.

“Stabby needs one of us here. Someone with a blade in their hands. Someone who can shoot if someone gets close. If this goes bad, they will come here.”

She was shaking her head before I finished.

“You want me to be defense?”

“I want you to be safe.”

She looked down.

Fingers curling. Breathing hitching.

Then she laughed—bitter, breathless.

“You know what’s funny?” she said. “Nobody’s ever asked me to sit out before.”

“Because you never had something to lose.”

“I always had me.”

I stepped closer. Touched her hip.

Now she didn’t pull away.

“You’re not just you anymore,” I said. “You’re his world.”

I looked at Stabby.

Then back at her.

“And you’re mine.”

She leaned forward and rested her forehead against mine.

I felt her exhale. Long and slow.

She didn’t cry. But her voice cracked when she whispered:

“If you die, I will resurrect you and kill you myself.”

“Fair.”

“Bring me the drive.”

“I’ll hand it to you myself.”

She kissed me.

Twice.

Then shoved the rifle case into my chest hard enough to bruise.

“Go ruin a corporation, pretty boy.”

The tunnel wanted me dead before I even stepped inside.

Narrow. Slick with condensation. Reeking of iron and mold and something old enough to have memories.

The access hatch had been welded shut—probably fifty years ago—but Michael’s handheld microtorch burned through it in thirty seconds. Then he handed me the ignition key, clapped my shoulder once, and said, “See you when the sky’s broken.”

Now it was just me.

Crouched in a geothermal crawlspace barely wide enough for my shoulders, inching forward in a world where the ceiling threatened to crush my spine and the walls hummed like a buried organ.

Each movement was deliberate.

Gloves tight. Blade sheathed along my right thigh. Pulse knife duct-taped under my left arm. My hoodie was waterproof. My boots weren’t.

In. Through. Out.
No noise. No names.

That was the rule. That was always the rule.

Thirty feet in, the shaft curved upward.

I climbed.

No ropes. Just friction and muscle and old scars whispering warnings.

Above me: silence.

Below me: heat.

Inside me: the exact temperature where a person stops feeling fear and starts calculating who dies first.

The tunnel split—left into darkness, right into darker darkness.

I went right.

Not because it looked safer. Because it smelled colder.

Verogon loved sterile things. They hated rust. They hated warmth. They wanted rooms that looked like brain scans and sounded like God holding his breath.

And that's what I found.

A hatch.

Seamless. Glass-fronted. Backlit by a pale blue grid.

Fingerprint scanner mounted on the right. Retina scanner on the left. No handles.

A voiceprint lock in the center.

I didn't say anything.

I just pulled a hollowed-out thumbprint capsule from my belt—synth-printed from a severed hand Cash stole off a Veroguard's corpse.

Pressed it to the glass.

No sound.

No welcome.

Just a hiss.

And the door slid open like it had been waiting for me.

Inside: silence.

Fluorescent blue floors. Frosted walls. Ceiling vents that pulsed with recycled air and artificial wind.

The hallway curved forward like a question that didn't want an answer.

I stepped through.

The Glass Box didn't feel like a building.

It felt like a trap that got bored of waiting.

The walls were too smooth, like skin pulled too tight. The lights didn't flicker. They pulsed. Every few seconds, a mechanical hiss whispered through the vents—like something was breathing just out of sight.

Server stacks rose around me in towering columns of chrome and synth glass, each one humming at a pitch just low enough to vibrate in my chest. Cooling fluid pumped through thin veins of tubing along the floor, like the place had arteries.

It was alive.

And I was inside it.

I moved low.

Left hand brushing the edge of a blade tucked into my hoodie lining. Eyes scanning for motion.

There was no dust.

No fingerprints.

No evidence of human presence.

And then: movement.

Just a flicker.

Overhead.

A ceiling panel slid back. Silent. Smooth.

A drone dropped like a spider on a wire—rotating slowly, lenses glowing.

Black chassis. High-end.

Stun darts. Nonlethal protocols.

That meant one thing: retrieval orders.

Verogon didn't want to kill intruders.

They wanted to capture them.

They wanted answers.

I stepped backward.

No sound.

The drone hovered. Adjusted. Focused.

I struck in three moves:

1. Upward throw—knife through the center lens
2. Catch the cord before it retracts
3. Yank the chassis down and crush it under my boot

It screamed once—mechanical static—then folded in on itself.

The light in the hall dimmed slightly.

Like the system knew.

One drone means five eyes.

I changed my path.

Slid through a bypass corridor marked REDACTED in peeling glyph-stamp.

Two more drones.

They moved slower.

Curious.

I ducked beneath one, let it pass, and dropped a signal jammer behind it.

Ten-second delay.

When the jammer popped, it would send a looped playback to their relay node—just enough time to disappear again.

The treasury node would be in the core. Always the center. Always the most vulnerable disguised as the most protected.

I climbed a maintenance ladder behind a coolant column, entered a crawl channel overhead, and dropped into a dimly lit junction with four exits.

They all looked the same.

But the third one was slightly warmer.

Which meant server heat.

Which meant data.

I moved forward.

The hallway narrowed into an octagonal choke point—clear glass walls showing internal dataflow streams pulsing like nerve signals.

And then I saw it:

A console port.

Old. Manual.

A physical uplink node.

Perfect for Cash.

I clipped a signal receiver to the jack and murmured into my comm mic:

“Glassbox breached. You’re in.”

Click.

No response.

Just the click.

That meant Cash was already live.

I stood perfectly still.

Listened.

No footsteps.

No whirring.

But I could feel it:

The weight of something in the network.

Watching.

And smiling.

There was a corridor past the uplink port—narrower, colder, lined with mirrored panels that reflected every flicker of light like a weapon. My footsteps came back to me in whispers.

I moved slow. Listening.

Then I saw it: a hidden console sunk into the wall behind a false access panel. Too well-placed. Too conveniently wired.

This wasn’t part of the server’s treasury feed.

It was personal.

I slid the panel open. Sat down. Plugged in.

Lines of system code unfurled on the screen.

Familiar. Wrong.

Then the name appeared:

PROJECT DELPHI - SUBROOT NETWORK // RESTRICTED

I didn't breathe.

I hadn't heard that name in years.

Delphi.

Where they turned children into test beds.

Where they carved us up to see how much of a soul could be replaced with circuitry.

I was ten.

Postavy, Belarus.

Snow outside.

Sirens inside.

Karyna screaming in the next room.

They dragged us in from schoolyards and empty houses. Promised food, medicine, new bodies for sick ones. Instead, they locked us in underground labs and split us open like puzzles they didn't want to solve—just smash and record.

The V27 shard was the prize. A neural-integrated combat enhancement prototype. It didn't belong in humans. They installed it anyway.

Then they erased our memories.

But not all of mine went.

A lot actually stayed.

Some things stay in the bones.

Some ghosts never get buried.

I kept reading.

Delphi wasn't dead.

It was operational.

And it was still monitoring something:

SUBJECT: KAZ.V27X

LIVE DATA FEED - ACTIVE

NEURAL TRACE - ON

GENETIC PATHING - 91.7% SYNC TO PARENTS

PARENTS: VLADISLAV, KARYNA I. / KAZAKOV, VIKTOR M.

LOCATION: CLASSIFIED // CURRENT SAFEHOUSE RADIUS: 3.4MI

My throat dried.

They hadn't lost him.

They were monitoring him.

Every breath.

Every beat.

Every line of DNA.

I didn't speak. Just opened the console's deeper root. It fought me. Not hard enough.

Then the real files spilled open.

- Trial Logs: Postavy
- Procedure V27: Failures, Rewrites, Rebirths
- Wipe Cycles: Kazakov / Vladislav / Ricochet / Nikita
- Delphi Memory Architecture: Test Sets 1-14
- SUBJECT: STABBY - PROJECTED UTILIZATION: BLACKGRADE GRAFTING

They weren't just studying him.

They were planning futures for him.

Weapon futures.

I opened my drive.

Plugged it in.

Selected every file.

```
TRANSFER ALL > LOCAL NODE G: // KILLJOI.EXE
```

Confirmed.

Began.

5%...

32%...

78%...

Done.

I sat in silence.

The humming of the vault surrounded me like static from a dead god.

And I whispered—just once—under my breath:

“They’re gonna pay for every second we lost.”

Then I turned. And walked back into the dark.

The floor beneath the vault corridor was glass.

Not just polished—transparent.

Below it: cooling channels, fiber optics, moving currents of coolant fluid that pulsed like artificial veins. The place didn't just store information—it circulated it. Like blood. Like memory. Like a living nervous system in digital drag.

I stood on it with one hand on my blade and the other on the uplink patch still buried in my hoodie sleeve.

“Status,” I said into the mic.

One second later—click. Then: Michael's voice.

“Corridor secured. Entry point breached. Cash’s working.”

I pivoted. Stepped through a chamber flanked with motionless turrets that hadn’t powered up. That was the third security system we’d bypassed without resistance.

None of it felt right.

Cash’s voice cracked in like static filtered through caffeine.

“Yo, babyface. Your loop’s holding, but there’s no active node defense. That’s not a good thing.”

“Could be passive traps,” I said. “Thermal mines. Self-activating lockdown. Or worse—no resistance because they already think we belong here.”

Michael’s footsteps came in behind me, heavy but exact.

He held out a small data cube.

“Virus core’s prepped. Let’s find the prize.”

I took it. Pocketed it.

Didn’t say I already had something worse tucked on a drive against my spine. Something I hadn’t told Karyna yet. Something she’d burn the world over.

The treasury vault was one floor down.

No guards.

No alarms.

Just a fingerprint scanner and a question.

Literally. Printed in faded glyphs above the access pad:

WHO WERE YOU BEFORE YOU WERE THEM?

I stared at it.

Michael grunted.

“I hate creepy philosophical locks.”

Cash laughed through the comms.

“Just answer: ‘Who gives a fuck.’ It worked on a NeoKush cube once.”

I didn’t answer.

I just pressed my gloved thumb to the panel.

A hiss.

A click.

The door opened.

We stepped inside.

Gold? No.

Credits? No.

Just rows and rows of data drives.

Thick. Cold. Each one the size of a brick.

The wealth of a dead empire stored in silent cubes.

Cash's voice again:

"Every drive is hard-coded to detonate if removed too fast. Time your pulls with the rhythm of the coolant pulse."

Michael looked at me.

"On your mark."

I listened.

Thump.

Whirr.

Pause.

"Now."

We moved.

Drive after drive—five-second pauses. Eighteen bricks into the duffel. Every one a shard of Verogon's control—credits, contracts, bribery logs, bioweapon patents, kill orders.

And under it all: Project Delphi Root Archive.

I tucked it last.

Close to the spine.

And whispered to the dark:

"We were never yours."

Then I hit the final command on my uplink.

ACTIVATE // VIRUS PAYLOAD: KILLJOI.EXE

Cash screamed joyfully in my earpiece:

“AND DOWN GO THE WALLS.”

Lights dimmed.

The hum broke.

Alarms flared—not inside the building, but across Tulsa.

Verogon’s net presence? Crashing.

And I whispered one word into the comms:

“Run.”

The garage door squealed like it always did.

Ricardo had rewired it to play airhorns when it opened. He claimed it helped him “sense vibrations of change.”

The van skidded in.

Smoking. Dented. One tire slightly on fire.

Michael was half-conscious, bleeding from the shoulder and muttering something about “revenge sex with a satellite.”

I killed the ignition and sat still.

Not from exhaustion.

Just from the weight in my pocket.

The drive.

Delphi. Kale. Us.

Stabby.

Inside, Karyna was already waiting. Hoodie. No makeup. Her eyes found mine before I’d even shut the door.

She didn’t ask what we found.

She just held out a hand.

I gave her the drive.

She didn't say thank you.

She didn't have to.

She was already walking toward the war room like it owed her answers.

Cash was in his chair—feet up, four screens glowing, a cigar he wasn't actually smoking dangling from his lip.

He looked like a gremlin in the middle of a digital apocalypse.

“So. Funny story.”

I dropped into the chair beside him.

“Don't make me hit you before you brag.”

He smirked and turned the screen.

Charts. Stats. Bank networks. Federal resource allocations. Crash logs. A full ø43 billion ripped from Verogon's treasury node.

Cash tapped a few keys.

“Two million. I took it. For us. For gear. For relocation if shit gets loud.”

Fair.

Then he clicked another tab.

Thousands of blinking markers appeared on a NorthAm map—rural deadzones, tribal resettlements, megablock ghettos, evac zones.

“The rest?”

“Distributed across every verified low-income household in the Republic territories.”

Canada. U.S. Mexico. Rural satellites. Evac belts. Displacement camps. Burn zones.

Every family who'd ever been ignored, erased, outpriced, policed, or poisoned by the corporate state?

Suddenly had ø3,700 in their accounts.

And Verogon's servers?

Offline.

Michael limped in, still holding a beer can full of ice to his temple.

He saw the screen. Raised an eyebrow.

“You Robin Hooded the whole treasury?”

Cash grinned.

“Robin Hood couldn’t hack a sexbot with a blender and a paperclip.”

“Is that what you did?”

“No. But I could.”

Outside, people were already screaming in the streets.

Joy.

Confusion.

Hope—not the cheesy kind, but the oh-fuck-something-changed kind.

The kind that smells like revolution.

I leaned back in the chair. Closed my eyes.

And said, flat:

“We’re gonna be hunted now.”

Cash nodded. Still smiling.

“Yeah. But now they gotta find us.”

You Named The File What?

Stabby was asleep on my chest, snoring like a little demon with a gummy mouth.

The Delphi folder was open.

And Cash had named it do_not_open_or_die.zip

I stared at it for a full ten seconds before asking:

“This is really what you named it?”

Cash didn’t look away from his snack. “Yeah.”

“Of all the things you could’ve picked.”

“Could’ve gone with traumafile_FINAL_v3.zip. Would’ve been honest.”

“Cash.”

He smirked. Cheese dust in the corners of his mouth. Gremlin energy already fully active at 9:27 a.m.

I sighed. Stabby shifted and made a small angry grunt in his sleep. His tiny fist clenched like he was dreaming about punching god.

I clicked the folder.

It opened like a jaw.

Files rolled down the screen—cold and clean and too familiar.

```
MEMORY_WIPE_CONFIRMATION//VLADISLAV  
IMPRINT_TRIALS_SUBJECT_KAZAKOV  
GENETIC_FUSION_RESULT: KAZ.V27X  
AUTOBREED_INITIATIVE: VALID
```

I didn’t move.

Didn’t blink.

I’d known. On some level, I’d always known.

That Delphi hadn’t just made us into soldiers. It had made him.

Stabby wasn’t just ours.

He was built. A sequel. A test. A symptom.

Xero sat beside me on the couch, silent, arms folded, eyes low.

He hadn’t said a word since we got back.

But I felt him watching the screen, line by line.

Cash finally said, “So I took ø2 million for us.”

“Good.”

“The rest I redistributed to every low-income housing district in the NorthAm sector.”

“Even better.”

“Also I may have bought a billboard that says Verogon deez nuts.”

I glanced at him.

“Respectfully,” he added.

Michael wandered in, shirtless as usual, bandaged shoulder, eating cereal straight from the box with a wrench.

He looked at the screen.

Then at me.

“Is that your brain?”

“No,” I said. “Worse. It’s my origin story.”

He crunched loudly. “Nice.”

I clicked into a deeper subfolder.

AUTOBREED: KAZ.V27X > SYNC_POTENTIAL > MATCHED SUBVARIANTS

Two entries.

No names.

Just blank silhouette profiles.

Estimated age: unknown.

Location: Western Bloc.

Neural tether: inactive.

DNA sync: 94.3%

I stared.

Stabby twitched against me.

A tiny spark snapped across his fingers.

Just a flicker.

Like static.

I said, without looking at Xero:

“You saw this already.”

Silence.

Then, softly:

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He didn’t answer.

Didn’t need to.

I knew the answer.

Stabby hiccuped.

Little body spasming like his insides were still arguing about being alive.

I ran my hand gently down his back, calming him.

Then I looked at the screen again.

“They’re out there.”

Xero: “Maybe.”

“No,” I said.

“They are.”

Ricardo burst into the room with a duct-taped flamethrower made from a bottle warmer and screamed:

“WE’VE INVENTED COMBAT BABYCARE!”

Cash yelled, “DO NOT AIM THAT AT THE BURRITO.”

Too late.

Fire.

I didn’t flinch.

I closed the laptop.

Held Stabby tighter.

Looked at Xero.

And said:

“We find them.”

“We bring them home.”

Stabby had just woken up, screamed directly into the void, then fallen asleep with his hand clamped around Ricardo’s index finger like a tiny emotional hostage.

Ricardo held him like he was made of uranium.

“Is it... normal for him to be this warm?” he asked.

“He’s a genetically gifted rageball,” I said. “He’s perfect.”

“Okay, but like... is he cooking me?”

“Deal with it.”

I ruffled his hair on the way past and collapsed onto the couch beside Xero.

He was already sitting, arms draped across the backrest like some half-bored devil. Watching. Always watching.

I dropped into his space like it was mine.

Because it was.

“You didn’t sleep,” I said, resting my arm across his chest.

“Neither did you.”

“Yeah, but I still look hot.”

He smirked, slow and tired. “You always look hot.”

“You know what else is hot?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“You.”

Ricardo made a noise like a wet fork scraping linoleum.

“I can hear you.”

I swung one leg over Xero and straddled him. Settled right into his hips. His hands went automatically to my thighs. Still calm. Still cool.

But I felt the shift.

I leaned close, lips brushing his ear.

“Say the word and I’ll do things to you that make Al cry.”

Ricardo groaned.

“Please don’t. I’m holding a child.”

Right then—perfect timing—the rest of the circus arrived.

Michael walked in first, munching on trail mix and looking like he hadn’t emotionally aged since the riot. Cash followed, holding a laptop under one arm. Trent stumbled in last, adjusting his hoodie and holding a half-eaten banana.

All three of them stopped.

Like they’d walked into an orgy in slow motion.

There I was, full straddle on Xero, both of us locked in like we were about to do war crimes to the furniture.

I looked at Xero with a dramatic gasp.

“Let’s make another baby.”

Cash turned around and walked right back to the war room.

Michael made a sound like nope and backed out, shielding his trail mix like it had rights.

Trent dropped the banana and straight-up ran for the hallway closet.

Ricardo gagged.

Audibly.

Stabby giggled in his sleep like he knew.

I leaned into Xero, forehead to forehead, and whispered:

“Let’s get Mcdonald’s.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and let the laughter crack out of my chest.

Real, shameless, unbothered.

We’d burned a megacorp the night before.

We’d exposed our son’s entire creation myth.

We had two maybe-siblings out in the world.

But in this moment?

In this trashfire of a living room?

We had each other.

And that was more dangerous than anything Delphi ever made.

There was a knock at the door.

Which was weird, because most people who wanted something from us either broke in or exploded.

Ricardo immediately ducked behind a beanbag chair.

Cash, from the war room: “If it’s Trent’s weird gamer friend again I swear to God—”

“No friends!” Trent shouted back from the closet.

Michael leaned against the wall, chewing trail mix and glaring at the door like it had insulted his boots.

Then the knock came again.

Steady.

Not urgent.

Just real.

I stood up.

Xero stood with me.

Because neither of us ever answered doors alone anymore.

I pulled open the front door—

And froze.

She looked about nineteen. Maybe twenty.

Dark hair buzzed short at the sides. Heavy boots. Old bomber jacket zipped halfway up over a faded synthetic-knit crop top that read: DELETE ME.

One eye glowed faint red with a biotech shimmer.

And her face—

“Karyna?”

Her voice cracked like a memory trying to escape.

“You are?” I asked.

“Nikita, you're sister.”

My stomach folded in on itself.

She nodded, slow.

There were scars at the edge of her jawline. A weapon holstered at her hip. A syringe pen strapped to her thigh.

She looked like me.

If I'd grown up in a warzone without a crew.

Behind me, Michael muttered:

“How the hell does everyone know where we live?”

Nikita took one small step forward and whispered:

“I've been looking for you for six years.”

The bedroom felt smaller with her in it.

Not in a bad way.

Just in that way where you realize a part of yourself you buried is now walking around, breathing the same air, sitting beside you, blinking back tears that look exactly like yours.

Nikita perched on the edge of the bed like someone waiting to be told it was all a trick.

I dropped beside her, stretched out, arms over my head, letting my voice fill the space the silence had been hoarding.

“You don't have to pretend with me. Not in here.”

She didn't say anything at first.

Then:

“I haven't... stopped pretending since I was ten.”

I turned toward her, propped up on an elbow.

“You don’t have to be alone anymore.”

She nodded. Eyes glassy but not falling apart.

“Feels weird. Like I’m inside a memory I didn’t earn.”

“You earned it. The second Delphi forgot you.”

She looked at me, really looked, like maybe she could finally see we were made from the same chaos and cut with the same blade.

A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

Then, voice quieter than before:

“Michael’s cute.”

I blinked.

“I’m sorry, what now?”

She shrugged, eyes darting away, suddenly a ten-year-old girl again.

“I just said he’s cute. In a... big dumb way.”

“Big dumb soft way,” I corrected. “He cried once because a puppy in an ad made eye contact with him.”

“That’s cute.”

“That’s a cry for help.”

She smirked and tucked her legs up on the bed.

“Do you think he’d be weird about it?”

I paused.

Then laughed, hard.

“Nik, he lives for weird. You’d just have to hit him first.”

“Hit him?”

“Yeah. Lovingly. Like, with a can of soup or something. That’s his love language.”

She laughed too—an actual laugh this time.

Real.

Rusty.

Raw.

But alive.

A knock at the door. Xero's voice, gentle:

"Everything good?"

"We're fine," I called back. "Just trauma-bonding and talking about boys."

There was a pause.

Then, "...Okay."

I turned back to her.

"You're really staying?"

She nodded. No hesitation this time.

"Yeah. If you'll have me."

I took her hand, held it.

"Welcome to the Goonz, little sister."

"Do I get a jacket?"

"Eventually. We initiate you first."

"How?"

"You have to survive Trent's cooking and Ricardo's interpretive dubstep."

"...I'll take the jacket now."

We both cracked up.

And for a moment?

It felt like a little piece of the world had finally come back home.

Welcome To The Mayhem

Stabby was asleep against my chest, drooling onto my hoodie like a champ, when Cash said the words:

"Weapons deal. Dock 17. Midnight."

That was all it took.

Michael sat up straighter like he just heard someone whisper "bar fight" in his dreams.

Ricardo ran by in the hallway with a broken lawn chair, yelling something about "emotional camouflage."

And Screech—who was upside-down on the war room table eating chili chips—grinned like a shark that just saw a leg.

"We're stealing their stuff, right?"

"Obviously," I said, bouncing Stabby lightly. "And making sure they blame each other."

"Classic," Cash added, scrolling through red heatmaps. "Iron Husk and the Vanta Vultures. Mid-tier assholes. Don't like each other. Hate us. Which makes this fun."

Xero stood next to the map projector like a pissed-off shadow with a dry erase marker.

"Deal's at an old shipping yard west of the Wazobashi spill zone. No drones. No cams. Just goons with crates and bad opinions."

"So we interrupt?" Michael asked, already stretching his shoulders like they were weapons too.

"We wait for the handoff. Blow the lights. Hit both crews. Leave a signature. Let them fight each other."

"Love that," I said. "It's almost poetic."

"I can scream during the hit," Screech offered.

Xero didn't even look at her.

"Don't."

"What if it's like... a useful scream?"

"No."

She flipped herself upright and yanked out her pistol with a flourish.

It looked worse than last time. Tape around the grip. A dent in the barrel.

"Still works," she said, proudly.

Xero blinked.

"That's not even safe."

"It's more aerodynamic now."

"Why the fuck would you throw it?" he asked the ceiling.

Cash just slapped a sticky note on the war map:

'Screech Upgrade: Throwable Guns??'

Michael leaned on the table, finally grinning.

"So who's riding?"

"Me. Xero. Cash remote. Screech," I said. "Michael on overwatch. Ricardo distraction squad. Trent stays here and doesn't cook anything."

Trent poked his head in from the hall.

"I made ham."

"Leave," Michael said.

Xero looked at me across the table.

We didn't need to say it. We were synced like that now.

This would be Screech's first official ride.

And we were about to find out what happened when a feral sister with PTSD and bad aim was given clearance to legally commit violence.

"You ready?" I asked her.

She pulled a lollipop from her boot and shoved it in her mouth.

"Born ready. Survived being abandoned by a murder lab. Screaming at drug dealers sounds like a Tuesday."

I smiled.

Stabby stirred slightly in the sling.

Outside, the sky was going gold with dusk and industrial runoff.

Inside, the Goonz were loading guns, checking maps, making jokes that would terrify most therapists.

"She's one of us now," I said to no one in particular.

"God help them," Xero muttered.

Xero made me stay out of it.

Not even in the van.

He wanted me rooftop, high ground, nowhere near the deal.

"You just had a baby," he said. "If something happens down there, I don't want it happening with you in the blast radius."

"I've been shot six times."

"And I still don't like it."

So here I was.

Top of a hollowed-out loading crane.

Thermal binocs in one hand.

Commlink in my ear.

And Stabby sleeping next to me in a nest of jackets and candy wrappers.

Below: chaos waiting to happen.

The shipping yard was all rusted steel and flickering floodlights.

Containers stacked like brutalist LEGO. Rats big enough to pay taxes.

At the center, two trucks. One Vanta Vulture. One Iron Husk. Ten men total.

Big guns. Bad posture. Badder intentions.

I saw the crates. Mil-spec. Heavy. Labeled with serial codes that probably meant don't touch this if you have a soul.

Screech touched one anyway.

Xero pulled her back by the collar like she was a cat about to eat wires.

"We wait for the deal to start," he said, low into his comm.

"I can smell lies," she muttered. "They're gonna double-cross."

"That's not a real thing."

"Then how come your sweat changed?"

He didn't dignify it with an answer.

Ricardo was doing laps near the dock entrance, pretending to be a trash collector.

He was wearing a jumpsuit that said SANITATION WIZARD on the back and pushing a shopping cart full of smoke bombs and loose ramen packs.

Michael was tucked in a shadow behind a stack of crates, waiting for his cue.

Cash's voice came over comms from the war room:

"Lights going in three... two... fun."

Boom. Darkness.

Screech screamed.

I don't know why.

No one had fired yet. No one had moved.

She just screamed.

"IT'S GO TIME, YOU CORPORATE PUKE NOODLES—"

And then she threw her pistol.

At **nobody**.

Just into the darkness.

It hit a wall, bounced off, and probably scared a rat.

“Why the fuck did she do *that*,” I heard Xero mutter under his breath.

Someone shot first.

Could’ve been Iron Husk. Could’ve been Screech’s battle cry.

Didn’t matter.

It exploded from there.

Through the binocs, I watched Xero move like a shadow with a bone to break.

One Husker went down without even seeing him.

Another got choked out with a bungee cord from the back of our van. (Thanks, Ricardo.)

Michael bulldozed through two Vultures like a blonde meat missile.

Screech?

She picked up an empty crate and hit someone with it.

Yelled “TAXES ARE FUCKIN’ FAKE” while dropkicking a guy into the mud.

Was it tactical? No.

Was it terrifying? Absolutely.

“We have the crates,” Xero said calmly into comms. “One minute to vanish. Karyna, van’s rolling. Confirm?”

“Confirmed,” I replied, already packing up.

“Stabby still asleep?”

“Didn’t even twitch.”

“Good.”

I smiled.

We disappeared before the Vultures and the Huskers could even figure out what hit them.

We left a Looney Goonz sticker on one truck door and Ricardo’s name written in hot sauce on the other.

Screech threw one more pistol before we left.

Where she got it, I have no idea.

We pulled up to the House with the van smelling like ozone, sweat, and something that might've been soup.

Screech was still vibrating with post-heist energy, swinging her legs out the back and announcing:

"I'd rate that a nine."

"Out of what?" I asked.

"Just nine."

Michael dragged a crate through the garage and muttered,

"I still don't know where she got that second gun."

Cash yelled from inside,

"Don't question it, just disinfect it."

Xero climbed out last.

Slow. Quiet. Jaw locked.

He didn't say anything at first, but I knew what he was thinking.

He hadn't expected to have to carry the op himself.

But he did.

I watched him move like he was still mid-mission—checking corners, scanning rooftops, coiled tight in that way only soldiers and first-time dads carry.

Screech wandered into the commons, still holding an empty rifle like a party favor.

"So, did I pass the Goonz test?"

Cash looked up from his laptop, deadpan.

"You threw two guns."

"That's innovation."

"You also screamed your location before the lights went out."

“Ambience!”

“And bit a guy.”

“He insulted my pants.”

Michael dropped onto the couch and cracked a beer.

“She’s in.”

“Seriously?” Xero asked, dropping his jacket onto the chair.

“Goonz ain’t about polish,” Michael said. “She’s loud, messy, unpredictable—”

“And on fire half the time,” Ricardo added.

“—which means she fits.”

Cash stood up, peeled the backing off a sticker, and slammed it onto the war room wall with pride.

The face glared back at us, lopsided and smug, bright yellow and bold:

FUCK YOU

Just under the X-eye grin.

Our mark.

Our message.

Our proof we existed and wrecked something with style.

Stabby, freshly changed and wide awake, hurled his pacifier across the room and hit Trent in the forehead.

Ricardo cheered.

Michael saluted.

Screech declared it “his first confirmed kill.”

I caught Xero’s eye.

He looked tired. But not worried.

I walked over and brushed his hand with mine.

“She’s chaos,” I whispered.

“So were you,” he whispered back.

“Still am.”

He smiled.

A little.

And for now, that was enough.

Date.EXE Initialized

Our closet looked like a panic attack at a rave.

Half of it was techwear.

The other half was bloodstained jackets, boots, cargo pants, things that had survived explosions—and somehow, one sparkly crop top that said CHAOS BRAT in synth-sequins.

I held it up and raised an eyebrow at Xero.

“Dare me.”

He looked up from lacing his boots.

“You’re already dangerous enough in sweatpants.”

“So that’s a yes?”

“That’s a ‘please let me walk behind you if you wear it.’”

I grinned.

Stabby was with Michael for the night.

Cash had been bribed into babysitting duty with snack credits and full drone control.

Ricardo was told very clearly not to teach him how to make flamethrowers.

Screech had wandered off somewhere with a crowbar and a juice pouch.

We had time.

Rare, golden, ours.

Xero was dressed fully in FOTU gear.

He looked like someone about to assassinate a CEO at a nightclub.

“You dressing like that for me, or for trouble?” I asked, brushing past him to the mirror.

“You are the trouble.”

“Flatterer.”

“I live dangerously.”

I settled on black-on-black tech pants, holster belt with no holsters, lace-mesh top under a black tank top

He watch me get dressed.

Slow.

Like he was cataloguing the moment for later.

“Eyes up, Kazakov.”

“You’ve got a weapon in every movement.”

“And you’ve got a metaphor in every compliment.”

“Guilty.”

We met in front of the mirror.

He reached up, adjusted a strap on my vest.

I ran my thumb along the curve of his jaw, brushed a fleck of dried oil from his cheekbone.

“You nervous?” I asked.

“About you?”

“About this.”

“About pretending we’re normal?”

“Yeah.”

He leaned in. Kissed me—slow and steady like the world wasn’t on fire.

“We’re not pretending. We’re making it up.”

“That sounds fake and romantic.”

“It’s both.”

The Pink Ruby was made of synth glass, bad decisions, and four different flavors of body glitter in the air vents.

The bouncer saw us coming from half a block away.

He didn't even pretend to check IDs.

"Sorry," he said, all shoulders and cybernetic jaw. "Not tonight."

"We're twenty-two," I said.

"It's not your age."

"Then what is it?"

He looked at Xero. Then at me. Then toward the alley.

"We just rebuilt our east wall. Don't want to do it again."

Xero said nothing.

He didn't have to.

His arm slid around my waist, calm and silent and implied threat in every finger.

I smiled at the bouncer—sweet and sharp.

"Let us know when you grow a spine."

We turned.

Walked off.

The sidewalk flickered under our boots like it was applauding quietly.

Downtown Tulsa was a neon mess of hovercar noise, synthbeat echo, and vape clouds that smelled like apocalypse fruit punch.

Xero took my hand like it was a secret.

I squeezed it back.

"So," I said, "you wanna dance in the street or find somewhere else to get rejected?"

"I'm open to alley fights and spontaneous makeouts."

"You're always open to spontaneous makeouts."

"Only with you."

"Liar. You'd kiss me even if I was undercover as a janitor."

"Especially then."

"You've got issues."

"And you love every single one of them."

We walked past a noodle cart blasting old Russian pop music.

Xero pointed at a bowl of something on the burner.

“You ever eat that?”
“Only if I’m actively trying to poison myself.”
“Romantic.”

I bumped his shoulder with mine.

He let me.

Then bumped back—harder.

I tripped on purpose, fell into his arms, dramatic as hell.

“Oh no, I’ve fallen for you.”
“That was awful,” he said.
“So are we.”

He kissed my temple.

We passed a wall tagged with our own sticker.

Bright yellow.

That FUCK YOU face grinning like it had seen us naked and survived.

I pointed.

“We’re famous.”
“We’re wanted.”

“Same thing.”

We kept walking.

No destination.

No plan.

Just the slow-burn truth of two people who’d bled for each other, burned for each other, and still had the nerve to flirt like teenagers with weapons.

And for one night—

That was enough.

The Fur Shop looked exactly like it had survived forty years of bad decisions, better drugs, and zero mopping.

There was a mural of a possum holding a Molotov.

The neon was pink enough to feel like a weapon.

And the music was something between a bassline and a threat.

Perfect.

The moment we stepped inside, I felt the shift.

Heads turned.

Cups paused midair.

And then came the murmurs:

“Is that—”

“No way. It’s her.”

“That’s the one who hijacked the Verogon convoy—”

“And him—he’s the knife guy—”

Someone shouted.

“YO! Goonz royalty in the building!”

That was it.

The swarm started.

A girl in glitter lashes asked for a selfie.

A guy in a fake fur coat tried to get Xero to sign his vape pen.

Some kid with dyed-orange eyebrows begged us to be in his HoloVid.

“Please say ‘fuck capitalism’—I’m doing a theme.”

I looked at Xero.

His jaw was tight.

Eyes scanning the exits.

Muscle in his cheek twitching like he wanted to vanish.

I stepped in front of a camera and winked.

“Fuck capitalism.”

Flash.

“And tell your mom thanks for the casserole.”

Flash.

“We’re not heroes,” I added. “We’re just very attractive criminals.”

Flash.

I turned back to him, gently took his hand.

“Breathe,” I whispered. “They don’t want to fight us.”

“They want to own us.”

“Then let ‘em rent the image. The real stuff’s mine.”

He kissed my hand.

Fast. Private. For me only.

The cameras missed it.

That made it better.

We finally slipped through the noise to the bar.

The bartender—a girl with half her hair shaved and an LED earring that blinked STAB ME GENTLY—slid two drinks toward us before we even spoke.

“On the house,” she said. “For the chaos.”

Xero stared at the glass.

“What is it?”

“I call it a Screaming Divorce.”

“Charming.”

“Cheers,” I said.

We drank.

It tasted like peach vodka and existential regret.

Delicious.

People still stared.

A guy across the room was wearing a bootleg Looney Goonz shirt.

Our sticker logo stretched across his chest like a middle finger in cotton.

He raised his drink to us.

Xero nodded back.

Not smiling.

Just seen.

“We don’t belong here,” he said.

“We don’t belong anywhere.”

“Then why does this feel like a spotlight?”

“Because you’re hot and dangerous and I’m loud and unkillable.”

“Fair.”

We leaned against the bar together.

Let the night happen around us.

Because sometimes, being wanted was louder than being alone.

And sometimes?

Being with him was the only place I felt real.

We slipped upstairs when nobody was watching.

The door was unmarked, half-hinged, like it didn’t want to be responsible for what it kept.

The stairwell smelled like whiskey and wet amplifiers.

Perfect.

Up top, the lights were dim. Faint blue, like dusk inside a memory.

There was a wide open floor, sticky and scuffed, a few folding chairs stacked to the side.

One couple sat kissing in the far corner, wrapped in each other like nobody else existed.

And beyond them, the stage.

Empty.

Low.

Quiet.

Xero walked toward it like it was a church.

He didn't say a word.

Just grabbed two chairs from the stack. Found a folding table. Set it dead center on the stage like it was always meant to be there.

He turned to me.

Nodded once.

I walked up like I was stepping into a dream.

We sat across from each other.

No music.

No chaos.

Just us.

And a thin layer of old bass notes in the floorboards.

"You ever think we'd make it here?" I asked.

"To a dive bar?"

"To this. A date. A life."

"No."

"Same."

I played with the edge of the table, tracing the old scratches like runes.

"I used to think I'd die in a hallway. Bleeding. Forgotten."

"I used to think I already had."

Silence.

Not bad silence.

The kind where everything you need is already in the space between breaths.

"You saved me," I said softly. "Twice."

"You brought me back," he whispered. "You made it mean something."

"We have a kid."

"I know."

"He has your frown."

"And your scream."

I laughed.

Then bit my lip.

"We've built something that should never have existed."

"And now it won't stop growing."

"Is that scary?"

"Terrifying."

"But?"

"But I want to keep building it. With you."

His hands were on the table now.

One inch from mine.

I placed mine over his.

He flipped them gently.

Palms up.

Like he was offering something holy.

"Karyna," he said. Voice low. Steady. Real.

"Marry me."

It didn't feel like a firework.

It felt like breath after drowning.

Like home.

Like the click of a lock opening, finally.

I didn't cry.

I just leaned in, forehead to his, hands clenched tight around his.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Yes, yes, yes, you absolute knife-wielding idiot, of course.”

Below us, the bar was still thumping with bass and neon and drinks and lives we didn’t live.

Up here?

Just light.

And love.

And us.

We found a corner seat on the late rail headed back to Cherry Street.

Car mostly empty.

Two wage drones asleep across the aisle.

Someone watching a holo-drama with bad dubbing at full volume.

And us—in our own little oxygen pocket of giddy, exhausted post-date heat.

I was straddling his lap again.

One hand in his hair, the other running up the inside of his jacket.

Our mouths didn’t know how to leave each other alone.

“This car got warmer,” I murmured between kisses.

“That’s you,” he said, lips brushing my jaw.

“Pretty sure it’s you.”

“Then it’s mutual combustion.”

He pulled me tighter.

I laughed against his collarbone.

It felt stupid. And perfect. Like we were teenagers again, hiding in basements, trying not to get caught.

But this time?

There was no getting caught.

We were the ones people ran from.

That's when I felt it.

The energy shift.

The stillness behind me.

A shape standing.

Weight shifting wrong.

Intent sharp.

I turned my head just as the guy said:

“No way. No fuckin' way.”

Gold chains.

Tear tattoo.

Leather Ice N9ne Po\$\$e vest—still stitched with frostbite motifs and bad decisions.

His pistol was chrome, ugly, bedazzled with pink rhinestones.

It was also halfway drawn.

“Look at you,” he sneered. “Real cozy with your girl. Bet she don't know the shit you—”

He didn't finish the sentence.

Because he never saw Xero's hand move.

Because it wasn't moving.

It was already there.

Gun already drawn.

Half-shielded under my thigh.

Still warm from body heat.

The trigger clicked.

Flash.

Muzzle pop.

The bullet hit center chest.

The Ice N9ne banger gasped like someone stole his voice.

Staggered back into a row of seats.

Slumped forward, wheezing.

Alive—for now—but not a threat.

I turned to Xero.

He hadn't stopped breathing steady.

Didn't even blink.

“You had that out the whole time?” I asked.

“Soon as he stood.”

“While we were—”

“Multitasking.”

I grinned.

Bit his lip.

“God, I love you.”

“I know.”

The guy on the floor groaned something about betrayal and “brotherhood.”

Ricardo would've kicked him and made it worse.

We just sat there.

Arms around each other.

Breathing slow.

Watching the lights of Cherry Street approach like home through the dirty window.

Party

The minute we stepped through the front door, I could feel it:

Ricardo was beatboxing into a colander.

Screech was in the kitchen using the blender wrong on purpose.

Cash had thirty different windows open on his screen and one of them was definitely a drone view of our kiss on the train.

Karyna announced it first.

No buildup.

No dramatic pose.

Just held up two middle fingers and said:

“We’re getting married, losers.”

Ricardo dropped the colander.

Michael inhaled a piece of meatball and started choking on joy.

Trent said “I volunteer as ring bearer—” and was immediately booed into the hallway.

Cash spun in his chair and grinned like a raccoon who’d hacked God.

“Oh it’s happening. I’m already designing the drone light show. We’ll spell out GOONZ 4 LYFE over downtown. Can we legally crash a satellite? I wanna crash a satellite.”

Michael finally recovered enough to wrap Karyna in a crushing cowboy hug.

“Little sister, I am so proud and so confused and also crying again—”

“You smell like hoagies,” she mumbled into his chest.

“That’s emotion,” he said, wiping his face with a tortilla.

Screech climbed onto the kitchen counter, declared herself chief wedding architect, and immediately began sketching a venue made entirely out of rusted sedans and bear traps.

“It’s symbolic,” she explained. “Like, love is a junkyard full of danger and you scream into it until someone loves you back.”

“That’s beautiful,” Ricardo said, already spray-painting something on the fridge.

Xero stood behind me, arms crossed, smiling in the soft way that meant this is overwhelming but I’d die for all of you anyway.

I turned, reached up, and pulled him down into a kiss.

They cheered like idiots.

Even Stabby, who was on the couch chewing on a remote, threw it into the air like he understood.

“This is stupid,” I whispered.

“I love it,” he said.

“We’re really gonna do this?”

“Yeah,” he said. “All the way.”

The room spun with noise and weird love and gun grease and cheese fumes.

And for once—

No one was bleeding.

No one was on fire.

It was just us.

Together.

Alive.

Engaged.

And exactly where we belonged.

The stars over Tulsa didn’t look like stars anymore.

They flickered—pale white LEDs behind the haze of light smog and crumbling orbit junk.

Still, it felt good up there.

High. Quiet. Away from Trent’s weird humming and Ricardo’s impromptu colander symphonies.

Michael cracked a beer next to me and didn’t say anything for a while.

He just sat.

Let his boots hang over the edge of the roof.

I mirrored him.

Shoulder to shoulder.

The silence didn't ask for anything.

So I gave it time.

"He'd be real proud of you," Michael finally said.

His voice was rougher than usual. Not from beer.

From memory.

"Kale?"

"Yeah. Even if he'd pretend not to be. He'd act all pissy. Say Xero wasn't good enough for you."

"He'd say that about *anyone*."

"Exactly."

"You said the same thing once."

"And I was *right*, at the time."

I smiled. It felt like it reached my ribs.

"You've changed your mind?"

"I've watched the guy knife four grown men with a plastic fork, pull you outta hell twice, and let you paint his nails while holding a grenade."

"So?"

"So yeah. You could do worse."

We drank.

The city below us buzzed with life, cops, sirens, deals, and credits that didn't mean anything to people like us.

"You scared?" he asked.

"A little."

"Good."

"Why?"

"Means you're not stupid."

He tapped the beer against mine.

We drank again.

A cop drone flew past, scanning alleyways.

Didn't look up.

Didn't dare.

"Michael," I said after a minute.

"Hm?"

"Do you think we're... good?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, all of us. As people. As the Goonz. Are we good?"

He looked at me.

His eyes were kinder than I expected.

"We're not *good*. But we're *ours*. That counts more."

I nodded.

It wasn't the answer I was hoping for.

But it was the one I trusted.

"You're not alone, kid," he added.

"Even if the wedding blows up."

"Even if everything goes sideways."

"You're one of us forever now."

"And we don't leave our own."

I leaned my head on his shoulder.

He grunted.

Didn't push me away.

We sat like that until the sun started glitching over the skyline.

Family wasn't blood.

It was this.

Beer breath. Ugly truth. Rooftop air and old grief.

And the unspoken promise:

If the world comes for you—
they're coming through me first.

It started with Cash saying:

“Hey, where the hell’s the van?”

Then:

“Hey, why is the *van camera* offline?”

Then:

“Hey, why do I hear moaning and a lighter click in the backup feed?!”

Everyone crowded around the war room screens.

Ricardo was eating a popsicle upside-down for some reason.

I was holding Stabby like a living riot shield.

Cash tapped a few keys.

And suddenly—

The main screen lit up with grainy night vision of the Looney Goonz transport van.

Inside?

Michael.

No shirt.

Hair messed up.

Mouth busy.

And Screech?

Straddling him.

Laughing between hits from a glass pipe that she lit off a half-burnt match.

Nobody said anything for five full seconds.

Then:

“...Well I’ll be damned,” I said.

“Finally,” Xero murmured.

“They’re so in love,” Cash said, deadpan.

“SHE’S SMOKING THE DEVIL’S CHEESE,” Ricardo shrieked.

“I didn’t even know he *liked* women,” Trent added, instantly regretting it.

The feed glitched as Screech tossed the crack pipe out the window like it was a confetti popper.

She giggled something about “riding him like a stolen Vespa.”

Michael groaned.

The van rocked slightly.

Someone coughed.

I think it was Stabby.

Then the camera cut out.

Hard.

Like someone unplugged it with extreme prejudice.

The war room stayed silent again.

Then Xero muttered:

“...Should we be worried?”

“Nah,” I said. “Crack’s not even top 10 weird in this house.”

“They seem happy,” Cash added.

“Grossly happy,” I clarified.

“Still counts.”

When the van rolled back into the garage, the crew lined up like nosy aunts.

Screech exited first, hair wild, face smug, looking like she’d just robbed a serotonin bank.

Michael came out a second later, shirt inside-out, beard wrecked, holding an empty coffee cup for no reason.

“Sooooo,” I said, arms crossed.

“Had a good *drive*?”

Michael stared at us all.

Then said:

“I think I’m in love.”

Ricardo burst into tears.

Trent fainted.

Cash held up a sign that read *FINALLY SOMEONE ELSE IS THE DISASTER*.

Screech kissed Michael on the cheek, lit a cigarette off Ricardo’s tears, and walked inside like a queen.

Michael followed.

Mumbling something about feelings.

We let them go.

Because honestly?

It was weird.

But it was kind of beautiful.

And in this house?

That’s as close to a blessing as you get.

There was a knock on the front door.

Not a kick.

Not a bang.

A knock.

Like from a postman. Or a really formal drug dealer.

Ricardo paused mid-handstand in the living room.

Cash lowered his burrito halfway to his mouth.

Michael grunted from where he was half-asleep, spooning Screech on the couch. She flicked a knife reflexively.

Xero raised an eyebrow at me.

I shrugged.

“I’ll get it,” I said.

“Want backup?” he asked.

“Please. It’s us. What are the odds they’re not holding a rocket launcher behind a bouquet?”

I opened the door.

And blinked.

Three men in black.

Long coats. Matching blood-red ties.

Perfect posture.

Smiling.

The middle one had a clipboard.

“Good evening,” he said with the calm of a funeral director.

“We are the Mayhem Murder Men. We’re here today on behalf of the Underground Unhappiness Syndicate to formally ambush and execute the Looney Goonz.”

“Do we have your permission to proceed?”

I stared at him.

Then looked past him.

No backup.

No snipers.

Just a matte-black SUV with the words Authorized Carnage Unit stenciled on the side.

“No,” I said.

“Excuse me?” the clipboard man asked, blinking.

“Permission denied.”

“But... we have matching outfits.”

“Still no.”

The three men looked at each other.

Then at the house.

Then back at me.

“Well,” the second one said. “Thank you for your time.”

“Would you like a pamphlet?” the third offered.

“Leave.”

They left.

Just turned around.

Walked to the SUV.

Got in.

Drove away.

I closed the door.

Turned around.

Everyone was staring.

“Who was it?” asked Michael, sitting up.

“Mayhem Murder Men.”

“They’re still around?”

“Apparently.”

“What’d they want?” Ricardo asked, chewing on an old playing card.

“To kill us.”

“Did they try?”

“No. They asked first.”

“And you said...?”

“No.”

“And they left?”

“Yup.”

Cash blinked like he was buffering.

“Man, at least they’re polite.”

Xero walked to the window and checked the street.

Empty.

“We should still reinforce the perimeter,” he said.

“Agreed,” I nodded.

“Also,” Screech added from the couch, “I like their branding. Real strong logo game.”

That night, we reinforced the windows with scrap steel, mounted a few extra turret cams, and left a sticker on the mailbox that said:

NO SOLICITING. NO SURPRISE HITS. YES TO CHAOS.

Just in case.

The alley beside the House of Hoodlums always smelled like burnt motor oil, week-old chicken tenders, and vague crime.

Perfect Goonz territory.

Xero and I were looking for a burrito I dropped earlier in the day, Michael tagged along for fun.

Xero walked ahead of me, boots quiet, eyes scanning. Michael followed, holding a sack of... honestly, I didn’t ask. Probably mechanical parts. Maybe severed limbs. Hopefully burritos. Same difference.

Then Xero froze.

Dead stop.

His arm shot out, catching my shoulder.

I opened my mouth, but he was already pulling me down.

We crouched low, behind a rusted-out air exchanger, barely breathing.

Michael blinked, confused, then dropped into a squat next to us like it was a game.

“Wait,” Xero whispered, his voice barely audible. “Something’s there.”

“What is it?” Michael whispered.

“Is it a chupacabra?” I whispered.

“No. Too big to be a chupacabra,” Xero said, eyes narrowing at the shadows.

Michael straightened back up slowly.

Hands on his hips.

Blank stare.

“*YOU* seen a chupacabra before?”

Xero and I stood too.

Xero didn’t even flinch. Just shrugged.

“I mean... I seen like... documentaries and stuff.”

Michael squinted at him.

“That doesn’t count.”

“I saw a guy once that looked like a chupacabra.”

“That also doesn’t count.”

“He was in prison. Named ‘Meatshade.’”

“Okay, that does count,” I nodded.

The thing in the alley?

Turned out to be a possum dragging a bag of Taco Hell wrappers.

It looked at us like we were the problem.

Which, fair.

Michael tilted his head.

“Yo. That thing does look like Meatshade.”

We walked back inside after that.

Xero never stopped glancing over his shoulder.

I never stopped smiling.

And the possum never stopped judging.

404: Girl Not Found

There was a knock at the door.

Again.

Xero, Cash, and I were mid-conversation about firewall breaching methods when it came.

Michael was eating cereal out of a blender.

Ricardo answered the door with a stun baton in hand.

“It’s for you,” he said, half-bored, peeking into the war room. “Your ex.”

“Which one?” I asked, already dreading it.

“The ugly one with the superiority complex.”

I sighed.

“Oh. Stuart.”

He stood at the door like he was on the cover of a failing energy drink can.

White faux-fur jacket.

Green LED glasses that flickered.

Goatee that looked like it had been shaped by sadness.

A messenger bag full of “gear.”

“It’s A1iv3,” he corrected, stepping inside uninvited.

“Nobody calls you that,” I replied.

“I do.”

“That doesn’t count.”

He walked into the war room like he owned it.

“Heard you guys are planning something big,” he said, setting down a tablet covered in fake chrome skull stickers. “Figured I’d lend my tech genius to the cause.”

Cash didn’t look up.

“You’re not a tech genius,” he muttered.

“I am literally a Level 9 Netrunner on SubGridPro.”

“That’s not a thing,” Cash said flatly.

“You miss me?” Stuart asked me directly, flashing a smile that deserved jail time.

“I forgot you existed until you knocked.”

Michael peeked in.

“Who’s the scarecrow with ego dysmorphia?”

“That’s Stuart,” I said.

“I thought we killed him.”

“Sadly no.”

“Give it time,” Xero added quietly, flipping his knife for no reason.

Stuart pulled out a modified laptop with no visible keyboard and began slapping keys like they owed him money.

Cash stared, silent.

Screech leaned in.

“What’s he doing?”

“I think,” Cash said slowly, “he just tried to hack into a PDF.”

Stuart turned with a smirk.

“Anyway, figured I could give you some pointers. Pretty sure I can optimize your uplink latency using triple-piped quantum phasing.”

“That’s not even a real sentence,” Cash replied, not blinking.

“And I’ll need full root access to your server core.”

“You’d need root access to a mirror to find your own reflection, bud.”

He didn’t get it.

He laughed anyway.

God.

“Karyna,” he said, sliding closer to me on the couch, “I know it didn’t end well. But I’ve evolved. I’m deep now. Meditate sometimes. Got a fish. Named him AlphaBit.”

“Do you need me to kill him?” Xero asked me in a whisper.

“Not yet,” I whispered back. “I want him to dig his own grave first.”

Screech passed by with a bowl of nails and popcorn, muttering, “He smells like expired crypto.”

Stuart continued trying to plug his laptop into random ports on the war room wall.

Cash was visibly twitching.

“Can we just lock him in the garage?” Michael asked.

“That’s where Trent lives,” I replied.

“Put ‘em both in. Let nature sort it out.”

The plan was simple.

In. Grab the implant. Out.

No killing. No alarms. No trail.

We even had Ricardo sedated, just in case.

Cash and I had been prepping for weeks.

Hacking floorplans. Cracking lock rotations. Pinpointing the exact refrigeration unit that held the Ceremonial G-Series Glow Implants—used in New Republic weddings as permanent ID bonds.

We didn't want a wedding ring.

We wanted proof.

Proof you could scan.

Proof under the skin.

Proof that said: She's mine. I'm hers. Forever.

We left Karyna at the House with Michael and Screech, claiming it was a “routine chip run.”

She didn't buy it.

But she let me go anyway.

The building was old, vertical, reeked of mold and melted skin lotion.

It used to be a luxury spa tower.

Now, it was the archive for LuxGene LLC — one of the last legal/illegal dealers of government biotech scrap.

The vault was five floors up.

Tripwired. Lasered. Armed with silent-drones.

But we were Looney Goonz.

We'd done worse.

Cash looped the surveillance grid.

I breezed through the entrance with a cloaked shard-override code.

Third floor hallway: clear.

Fifth floor landing: clear.

“This is going smooth as hell,” Cash muttered in my earpiece.

“Samoooooooooth,” I whispered back.

“Like Stuart’s face.”

“Don’t jinx it—”

That’s when the wall exploded.

I turned. Debris rained from the ceiling.

Smoke. Lights.

And out of it, like a glitch in a dating sim:

“I’M HERE TO HELP.”

Stuart.

Wearing a hoodie that said ‘HACK THE PLANET’.

Holding a literal household WiFi router.

“Stuart?!” I shouted.

“I rerouted your route. Upgraded your uplink path.”

“YOU BLEW UP A WALL!”

“Yeah, but like, strategically.”

Two drone sentries emerged from the smoke.

One scanned Stuart and locked on instantly.

The other was already firing.

I tackled him out of the way and snapped the barrel off the drone’s turret.

Cash came over the comms:

“WHO LET HIM IN?!”

“He tracked our signal!” I growled, breaking the second drone’s casing with a single blow. “I think he thinks this is helping.”

More alarms.

More movement.

The vault started to auto-freeze.

“You have thirty seconds!” Cash barked. “Implants are cryo-sealing—if you don’t grab it now, it’s permanent lockdown!”

I sprinted through the hallway, vaulted over a flickering scanner field, and dove into the vault room.

Rows of glowing canisters.

Blue. Green. Purple—

Pink.

I punched the containment seal.

Grabbed the injector. Cold as hell.

Slid it into my neck holster.

“Got it,” I whispered.

Behind me, Stuart was knocking over medical carts like a cat with a caffeine addiction.

“We should upload a viral logon loop in here,” he said.

“You should upload yourself into a traffic accident,” Cash muttered.

We blew the side exit using a thermite charge

Stuart tripped.

I didn’t help him up.

He made it anyway.

By the time we reached the getaway van, Cash was vibrating with rage.

“Weeks of planning.”

“I know—”

“Sixteen bypasses. Four silent kills. A quantum-displacement security patch—”

“Cash, I got the implant.”

I held it up.

Tiny.

Elegant.

Pale pink, glowing gently in its frozen case.

Cash stared.

Then nodded once.

“If that implant malfunctions because of his dumbass heat signature, I’m stabbing him with it.”

“Fair.”

From the back seat, Stuart chimed:

“I really think we make a good team.”

We didn’t answer.

I was in the war room nursing a bottle of electrolyte sludge and listening to Ricardo freestyle over the sound of a broken microwave.

Then I heard the door burst open.

And him.

“We DID IT!” Stuart’s voice exploded through the house like a sinus infection with wifi.

“Mission. Accomplished.”

“That’s not a phrase you’re allowed to say,” Cash muttered, walking in behind him and looking like he’d swallowed a brick out of spite.

“Big win for team A1iv3!” Stuart grinned, arms raised like he was summoning applause.

I looked over at Xero.

He wasn’t smiling.

His jaw was locked.

His eyes flicked to me.

Then down to the small cryo-case in his hands.

“We were going to surprise you,” he said softly, voice low and broken.

He held up the implant.

Sleek.

Cold.

Glowing faint pink under the frost.

My breath caught.

It was beautiful.

It was real.

It was... supposed to be private.

“Oh, this thing?” Stuart said, loudly. “Yeah, I’m the one who helped find that.”

“You found a wall,” Cash said. “And then detonated it.”

“Yeah, well. Tactical improvisation. And she’s welcome, by the way.” Stuart winked at me like he was a party clown that couldn’t die properly.

I stared at him.

Then looked back at Xero.

His expression was unreadable — but I could see the disappointment in the set of his shoulders. The quiet fury in his stillness.

He wanted this moment to be ours.

Something sacred.

Something earned.

And now it was Stuart’s TED Talk.

“It’s not a big deal,” Stuart said, shrugging.

“To you,” I said. “Because you don’t have anything worth surprising anyone for.”

He blinked like I’d slapped him.

I hadn’t.

Yet.

“Well... maybe don’t plan stuff if you don’t want it—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Xero cut in, voice level but loaded.

“I was just saying—”

“Don’t...
...Finish. That. Sentence.”

Stuart raised his hands.

“Whoa. Okay. Tense much?”

Michael walked past, holding a half-eaten raw onion.

“You’ve been here two days and I already want to vacuum your soul out with a shop vac.”

Cash dropped his gear on the couch and went straight to the kitchen.

I crossed the room and stood in front of Xero.

Took the case from his hands.

Held it like something sacred.

“This is still perfect,” I whispered. “Because it came from you.”

He met my eyes.

Softened.

Let out a slow breath.

In the background, Stuart muttered, “So no group hug or...?”

Ricardo passed him wearing two socks as gloves and yelled:

“SOMEONE FEED THE VIRGIN TO THE FLOOR!”

We didn’t answer.

We didn’t look back.

We just stood there, forehead to forehead, pink glow between us, trying to pull the silence back into something like peace.

Finally.

No screaming.

No fire alarms.

No Ricardo running through the kitchen yelling about ghost cheese.

Just me.

Xero.

And about thirty minutes of silence that felt like gold.

The room was warm. The lights dim.

He was above me, one hand braced on the headboard, the other tangled in my hair, our breaths catching between stolen kisses and bitten moans.

His voice was rough in my ear.

“You’re mine.”

“Yeah?” I gasped. “Then prove it.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“Then shut up and fuck m—”

CREAK.

Both of us froze.

Another sound.

Something soft. Awkward.

Like a sock rubbing against a cardboard box.

The closet.

Xero was off me instantly.

The bedsheet wrapped around his hips like a Roman ghost.

He stood.

No hesitation.

Gun already in hand.

I don’t even know where it came from.

He just has guns, I guess.

“Stay here,” he muttered.

“Not going anywhere,” I said, clutching the blanket to my chest.

He padded across the carpet.

Slow.

Silent.

That predator stillness I always loved a little too much.

He put his back to the closet.

Took a breath.

Yanked the door open.

And there he was.

Stuart.

Kneeling.

Pants around his ankles.

Holding his dick.

Mouth full of cake snack.

“Hey,” he said.

“WHAT THE FU—” I started.

“Okay, listen,” Stuart said, crumbs spilling from his mouth. “I thought this was Cash’s room.”

“You watched us for 23 minutes,” Xero said, voice flat.

“I thought you were fighting.”

“Naked?!”

“I mean it was passionate—”

“Xero, shoot him.”

Xero didn't shoot him.

But he did pistol-whip him in the forehead

“OW. Okay, okay! I'm leaving! This is a hostile environment!”

“It will be,” Xero growled, “if you ever hide in our closet again.”

“I was being respectful!”

“You were being deceased-adjacent,” I snapped.

Stuart stumbled out of the closet, holding his head, tablet dangling from his wrist, muttering something about “Ethics.”

He tripped over pulling his pants up and fled down the hallway.

We sat in silence for a second.

Then Xero turned back to me.

Still holding the gun.

Still wrapped in the sheet.

“Where were we?”

I smiled.

“Just past the part where you claimed me.”

“Good,” he said, climbing back into bed.

“Now do something about it.”

Stabby was wearing a tiny band shirt that said CRY HARD OR DIE TRYING.

He was four weeks old.

Already cooler than all of us.

I was lying on the couch, head propped on Xero's lap, one bare leg hanging over the cushions. The Looney Goonz were scattered across the room — Cash yelling at a cooking show, Ricardo trying to hit the bong upside down, Michael shirtless for some reason.

Screech was sleeping upside down on a beanbag chair.

Trent was in the hallway closet, live-streaming a mukbang in total darkness.

“Mmmmmm,” I teased, swirling a cherry lollipop on Stabby's tongue. “Baby likes sweet things. You gonna grow up and eat nothing but candy and bullets, huh?”

Stabby giggled. Xero giggled.

Ricardo blinked.

“Uh. What are you doing?”

“Letting him taste life.”

“That baby's gonna evolve teeth overnight.”

Stabby kicked his legs.

I let him gum the lollipop gently, then popped it back in my mouth.

Across the room, I caught Stuart staring.

His eyes did that thing — the unearned gaze.

“Damn,” he said, licking his lips.

“I wanna get a taste too.”

The room went still.

Cash paused the show mid-slapfight.

Michael froze mid-chip.

Even Ricardo stopped chewing on an extension cord.

I sat up slowly.

Xero was gone from the couch.

Behind Stuart, Xero appeared like a shadow falling off a rooftop.

Silent.

Precision-cut rage.

His hand moved fast.

A quick snap.

CRACK.

Stuart's neck twisted.

His eyes bulged.

Then... silence.

He slumped forward onto the coffee table — face first into a bowl of off-brand cereal.

No one screamed.

No one moved.

We all just sat there.

For a second.

Then:

“Finally,” Cash muttered.

“Sweet relief,” Michael added.

“I didn’t even hate that,” Ricardo said, sipping transmission fluid.

“Told y’all he smelled like pre-crime,” Screech yawned without looking up.

“Wait—” Trent’s voice echoed from the hallway. “Did somebody die? Or was that the TV?”

Xero bent down, checked Stuart’s pulse — not out of concern, just for confirmation.

Then straightened.

“You good?” I asked, standing beside him.

“Yeah,” he said, brushing cereal dust off his forearm. “Was gonna let him live.”

“Was?”

“Then he said something stupid.”

Michael grabbed Stuart’s ankles.

Cash grabbed the shoulders.

Ricardo opened the front door.

They carried him out in total silence.

The trash bin was already half full of duct tape, broken hoverboard parts, and one of Trent’s expired burrito experiments.

They stuffed Stuart in.

Closed the lid.

“Republic trash comes at 4 a.m.,” Cash noted.

“Good,” Xero replied.

“Think they’ll recycle him?” Ricardo asked.

“Maybe his ego,” Michael shrugged.

We went back inside.

Closed the door.

And for the first time in weeks—

The house felt peaceful.

The Ceremony

Cash once said if I ever got married, the world would probably end mid-vow.

I told him to shut up and hand me a stun baton.

Now, it was wedding day.

And I was actually... nervous.

“You think this dress makes me look like I believe in feelings?” I asked Ricardo, adjusting the straps of my stolen cyberlace halter gown.

“You look like a prom queen,” Ricardo beamed. “Which is to say—perfection.”

He twirled.

In his own dress.

Bright purple.

Crinoline.

Sequins.

Lipstick that looked like it was applied with a paintball gun.

No one told him to wear a gown.

No one stopped him either.

Screech was in the corner jamming a dozen glowsticks into her mohawk while eating raw espresso beans out of a baby sock.

“Is it like... a wedding or a weapon drop?” she asked.

“Both,” I said. “Probably.”

Downstairs, I could hear Cash yelling at Trent to “stop polishing the hot dog cart!” and Cash yelling at Michael to “wear sleeves just this once, you feral accountant!”

I looked at myself in the cracked bathroom mirror.

Hair up. Tiny rhinestones beneath my eyes. A thin pink thread woven into my locs.

I exhaled.

“He’s gonna cry when he sees you,” Ricardo said, setting a tiara on my head with absurd tenderness.

“You think?”

“He cries at vintage toaster commercials.”

“Those are emotional.”

“Exactly.”

I grabbed my jacket — matte black leather, draped over my dress like a threat — and headed downstairs.

The House looked like a riot in a confetti factory.

- Paper lanterns strung between busted ceiling tiles.
- A bouquet of stun grenades.
- “CONGRATS ON THE ILLEGAL UNION” spray-painted across the fridge.
- Duane had set up a hot dog cart beside the couch.
- Giovanni stood near the fireplace, sipping something green and probably illegal.
- Cash’s parents were chatting politely with two homeless men who may or may not have invited themselves.
- Lil Glo was vaping through a mesh veil.

And at the front door—

stood Irina.

Xero’s mother.

Black shawl.

Hair in a low bun.

Eyes like old bruises.

I froze.

She looked at me.

Then at the stairs.

Then spoke softly in Russian:

“Он любил тебя до того, как понял, что это любовь.”

Xero, standing just beyond her, nodded once.

Eyes locked on mine.

He was in his black coat.

No tie.

Eyes rimmed in red, but steady.

He looked at me like I was everything sharp and real and good in this world.

“Ready?” he asked.

“To ruin everything?” I grinned. “Always.”

Cash appeared beside him.

Suit jacket halfway on. Clip-on tie. Holding two neural injectors in a silk-lined case.

“Let’s get you married before someone accidentally blows up the guests.”

“Someone?” Ricardo called out. “You mean Screech?”

“Obviously.”

Xero stepped forward.

Took my hand.

And for the first time all morning, the noise faded.

The House fell into hush.

The glitch ceremony was about to begin.

Stabby’s breathing was steady against my chest.

Tiny weight.

Heartbeat like a spark plug.

I could feel his warmth through the carrier, a quiet tether between all the noise and me.

I walked down it with Xero beside me.

Karyna's hand was in mine as we walked up the aisle — which was really just a strip of cracked rooftop flanked by broken riot shields and chairs that had definitely been salvaged from a collapsed church.

Stabby strapped to his chest, fast asleep in tiny noise-canceling headphones with cat ears.

The sky was black.

The city below hissed and buzzed and flickered.

And yet—

she glowed.

Even now, I don't remember the music.

I don't remember who screamed "HELL YEAH" or how many paper lanterns were on fire by the time we reached the altar.

All I remember is the way Karyna looked at that moment.

Like danger dressed up as devotion.

Ricardo was officiating.

In a tiara.

Holding a beer in one hand and a sheet of crumpled paper in the other.

He looked like a drunk fairy godmother and sounded like a Twitch streamer trying to get through his vows without crying.

"We're gathered here today to commit a glitch in the system. A big one."

"Xero. Karyna. You both somehow found love in a pile of blood, static, and C-tier junk food.

And that's... weirdly romantic."

"Now, say things."

Xero turned to me.

I could see the reflection of the lanterns in his eyes.

I looked at her.

She looked at me.

"You first," I said.

"Coward," she grinned.

Then she spoke.

And the whole world went quiet in my chest.

"You showed up when I was nothing but adrenaline and damage..."

Her words blurred around the edges.

But the truth of it hit clean.

"You're not just my partner. You're my safe house."

He blinked hard.

Then spoke.

His voice was low. Sure. Like a secret he was finally ready to say.

I wanted to say something clever back.

Instead, I just breathed.

Spoke the one thing I knew for sure.

"You made chaos feel like home."

"You remind me who I was. And who I never want to be again."

"I'm yours. Not just today. But every day the world doesn't manage to kill us."

Ricardo sniffled like he'd been hit in the feelings.

"Okay that's the hottest thing I've ever heard."

Cash stepped forward with the case.

Sleek. Locked. Lined in black.

"Marriage implants are armed," he said, fidgeting with the injectors. "Try not to flinch unless you want a cyber-seizure."

Karyna went first.

She didn't even blink.

The injector hissed.

Her neck glowed.

Soft pink — pulsing under the skin like a promise trying not to break, like the shards embedded in our bodies, but this time, we chose to have this pink glow.

Then it was mine.

Cold against my skin.

Sharp hiss.

Quick warmth.

Then light.

Barely visible, but definitely there.

Permanent.

“By the power vested in me by absolutely no one,” Ricardo said, raising his drink, “I now pronounce you bonded, mutually doomed, and probably watched by at least six agencies.”
“You may now fuck or something.”

I pulled her in and kissed her.

Xero pulled me in.

Kissed me like we were stealing each other’s breath.

No fear.

No filter.

Just... her.

And me.

And the static between us humming like a broken song finally playing right.

Stabby grunted.

Screech tackled the cake.

Michael made a toast to “violent fidelity.”

Lil Glo auto-tuned something about neural love.

And I didn’t care.

Because honestly, I’m crazy about her.

I love this girl.

And for once—

I felt right.

Like the world could try.

But it wouldn't break us.

The fireworks hadn't stopped.

Ricardo was screaming at a bottle of champagne like it owed him money.

Lil Glo was freestyle-rapping about someone's grandma.

Screech was licking cake off a bulletproof vest.

Cash and Michael were already arguing about whose toast was better even though neither gave one.

Karyna was cradling Stabby in one arm, dancing in a crooked circle with two unhoused guests who kept calling her "Our Lady of Illegal Love."

It was perfect.

Which is exactly why I slipped away.

I found her by the fence at the edge of the rooftop.

Under the busted billboard for "TRY NÜDIJUICE™ — NOW LEGAL IN 3 STATES."

She stood quiet.

Wrinkled jacket. Plastic cup in her hand.

Eyes that had seen far too much and said far too little.

My mother.

"Irina," I said.

She didn't speak at first.

Just looked me over.

Not like she was confused.

More like... verifying I was real.

Then she whispered:

“Мой сын.”

I nodded.

“Yeah.”

“Ты был мёртв.”

“Almost,” I said.

She stepped closer.

Her hands were shaking, but not from fear. Just from... living too long with something broken inside.

“Я не смогла остановить это. Прости.”

“I know,” I said softly.

“Ты помнишь свою сестру?”

A pause.

Tatsiana’s eyes flashed through my mind – wide, twitching, angry and innocent all at once.

I nodded.

“She’s alive.”

Irina’s lip trembled.

She pulled something from her pocket.

A photograph. Faded.

Me. A child. Karyna next to me..

Smiling like none of it was real.

She handed it to me.

I took it.

Didn’t speak.

Couldn’t.

Then she touched my cheek – just briefly.

And kissed my forehead like it was still allowed.

“Она хорошая,” she said, glancing at Karyna.

I nodded once.

“Yeah,” I said. “She is.”

We stood there for another minute.

The music thudded behind us.

The cake was on fire.

Trent was probably crying in a mop bucket.

And yet—

For this moment, the noise fell away again.

“Ты всё ещё мой мальчик,” she said.

I didn’t answer.

Just hugged her.

Once.

Quick.

Firm.

Real.

Then I turned back toward the party.

And she let me go.

RECEPTION

The cake was still on fire.

Screech tried to save it by blowing on it like it was birthday candles.

That just made the flames go sideways and set part of Ricardo's wig ablaze.

He didn't even flinch. Just screamed "WITCH BAPTISM" and kept dancing.

Cash passed around glowstick shots with actual battery acid in them (allegedly).

Michael handed out illegal fireworks like party favors.

Trent passed out in the DJ booth after confusing a bottle of absinthe for mouthwash.

Xero came up behind me while I was half-slow dancing, half-trying to stop Stabby from eating a bullet casing someone mistook for a mint.

He slipped an arm around my waist.

"You married yet?" he asked.

"I mean, I glitched some dude earlier and installed commitment software," I said, leaning against him. "Might've been you."

"Hope so," he said. "That guy looked dangerous."

We kissed again, messy and crooked.

Ricardo screamed "GET A ROOM" from inside a shopping cart that Giovanni was pushing in aggressive figure-eights.

The music got louder.

Someone dropped a smoke grenade for "vibes."

The rooftop lit in flashes of pink and orange as the fireworks started.

Stabby watched them like he'd seen it all before. Like fire was just a mood.

At some point, Lil Glo tried to crowd-surf and nobody caught him.

Cash and Michael gave an impromptu speech about "anti-authoritarian matrimony."

Screech threw Trent off the roof by accident (he landed in a dumpster and screamed "FIVE STARS").

But the moment—

the real one—

was just me and Xero.

Sitting on the edge of the rooftop, legs dangling over the city like we could fall and not care.

Stabby on my lap.

Xero's hand in mine.

The marriage implant under my skin still pulsing faint pink.

"We did it," I whispered.

"We did," he said.

A pause.

Then:

"We're gonna have to fake our deaths soon, aren't we?"

"Absolutely."

"Cool."

We watched the skyline breathe.

Sirens in the distance. Drones overhead.

But none of it reached us.

We were outlaws.

Parents.

Lovers.

Glitched.

Married.

Untouchable.

For now.

MEMORY RESTORED

I remember Myadelka like it was my first secret.

Not the way it actually looked — brownish water and trash stuck in the reeds — but how it felt.

Like something wide. Something soft and brave and ours.

Viktor and I called it “our ocean.”

We used to take off our shoes and wade in ankle-deep, yelling pirate nonsense and throwing rocks at fish that never showed up.

Sometimes he’d say he saw one.

“I saw a big one, Kar.”

“You’re lying.”

“It had a gun.”

“Liar.”

“I’m telling the fish the truth.”

“You’re a fish narc, Viktor.”

He’d shove me, I’d kick mud at him, and we’d end up collapsing in the tall grass behind the swing set, laughing like the world didn’t have teeth yet.

The park was just rusted metal and sunburnt wood.

Two swings, one bent slide, a broken merry-go-round that shrieked like a war crime every time someone used it.

We used it anyway.

There were other kids — some from the other block, some from the school with the leaky roof. But they didn’t matter.

It was always just him and me.

His hair was longer then.

He never smiled in pictures, but he’d laugh when I fell off the swing and landed in bird poop.

“That’s karma,” he told me once.

“That’s disgusting.”

“Same thing.”

I told him I hated him.

He gave me his extra piece of bread at lunch.

We made a pact the day I got stung by a wasp on the back of my neck.

I cried.

He punched the wasp out of the air.

Like that would help.

Then he said:

“If anybody ever tries to take you, I’ll break their knees.”

He was seven.

I think he meant it.

We didn’t know anything about Project Delphi yet.

Not about soldiers in white vans.

Not about mothers being told “your child’s special.”

Not about what would happen in the next six months.

All we knew was—

the river was ours.

The park was a castle.

And if we ran fast enough through the grass,

we could outrun everything.

They told us the rooms were off-limits.

“Therapy prep only.”

“Medical procedures.”

“Not for little girls.”

So I waited.

Until it was dark. Until the hallway lights went into “night mode” and most of the nurses sat in the break room watching propaganda music videos.

Then I slipped out.

I had memorized the map from the clipboard I stole two days earlier.

Hall B. Room 9.

I wasn’t even sure he was still in there. They didn’t talk about Viktor anymore. Not to me. Not to anyone. The other kids whispered his name like it was a disease.

“He’s one of the real ones.”

“Got a shard already.”

“They’re testing it on him. The V-type.”

I didn’t care.

I just wanted to see him.

Room 9 smelled like bleach and wires.

And blood.

I crept in. Quiet. Barefoot. The tile cold.

He was strapped to a reclining chair like a dentist’s throne from a nightmare.

Tubes in his arm. Sticky sensors on his forehead.

And blood — smeared under one nostril, dried at the corner of his mouth.

Eyes closed.

Face pale.

“Viktor?” I whispered.

He didn't move.

My throat caught.

"Hey—hey fish narc, wake up."

Nothing.

I stepped closer.

Tried to reach for his hand.

That's when he twitched.

Just barely.

Then his eyes opened — fast, sharp.

Red veins spiraling out in the whites like cracks in porcelain.

"Kar," he whispered.

His voice was gravel.

"You're not supposed to be here."

"Neither are you."

I sat down on the floor beside him.

"They said I'm broken," he said, quietly.

"They're stupid."

"My head feels like it's full of buzzing glass."

"Okay. That's stupid too."

He tried to smile. Failed.

Then he whispered:

"I saw them take a kid yesterday. He didn't come back."

My fingers curled around the edge of the chair.

"You're not leaving me," I told him.

He didn't answer.

Just looked at me – blood drying on his chin, wires twitching.

Like he already knew what he was becoming.

“If they take you again,” I said, voice low, “I’ll break their knees.”

It was the first time he laughed in days.

Even if it hurt.

We sat there until I heard footsteps down the hall.

I kissed the back of his hand and ran.

They caught me the next morning.

I lied about why I was gone.

I said I sleepwalked.

They didn't believe me.

They stopped calling me “gifted” after that.

Started calling me “noncompliant.”

I didn't care.

Because I knew something no one else did:

Viktor was still in there.

And he still knew me.

One day when I was 10..

I couldn't stop shaking.

My hands felt like they weren't mine anymore.

My skin itched where they'd injected the gel.

My chest buzzed with leftover static from the neural probes.

And I couldn't stop crying.

Not loud. Not dramatic. Just... broken.

Like the kind of crying that sneaks out when your throat's too tired to scream.

I was curled up in the corner of the holding room.

Thin blanket. Cold wall.

Everything hurt.

I didn't even care if they saw me on the cameras.

Let them watch.

Let them see what they were breaking.

I heard the door open.

I didn't look.

They weren't supposed to let us mix between sectors, not since the incident with the twins and the broken bone saw.

But I knew it wasn't a guard.

Because he didn't say anything.

He just walked over.

Slow. Careful.

And sat next to me.

Back against the same wall.

Legs pulled up. Elbows resting.

Silent.

Still.

I turned.

It was him.

Viktor.

He didn't look at me.

He just looked ahead.

Eyes blank.

Face hard.

But his hand found mine.

Quiet.

Like it was a secret between us.

I didn't say anything.

I didn't have to.

He squeezed once.

Not hard.

Just... steady.

I squeezed back.

His voice was hoarse when he finally spoke.

"They keep saying we're stronger than the others."

I sniffled.

"I don't feel strong."

"You are."

"They made me bleed."

"That's because they're scared of you."

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

He didn't flinch when I leaned against his shoulder.

Didn't move when I let the last of the tears spill.

We sat there until the light above the door turned green.

Another shift change.

Another scan.

But I didn't care.

Because in that moment—

Viktor was the only safe thing in the world.

We weren't lovers.

We weren't soldiers.

We weren't subjects.

We were just two kids holding on to what the world hadn't taken yet.

Each other.

Then one day at 13

The alarms didn't scare me.

The screaming didn't either.

What scared me was how quiet Viktor looked — blood dripping from his sleeve, eyes locked forward, jaw set like he was holding his whole soul together with his teeth.

We were running.

We'd been running for eight minutes straight.

Bodies behind us.

Sirens above us.

He'd grabbed my hand back in the east wing — where they kept the neural mapping tanks. We'd just taken out two whitecoats and a security dog with a scalpel and a broken IV pole.

Then we ran.

“Left,” he said.

“I know,” I snapped. “I know this route.”

“You’re bleeding.”

“We’re both bleeding.”

It didn’t matter.

Nothing did.

We were almost there.

One exit tunnel. One unguarded perimeter zone. And we’d be—

The shot rang out before I saw the gun.

A sharp hiss.

Then—

warmth behind my eyes.

A fizzing, hot pressure in the base of my skull.

I stumbled.

Viktor caught me.

But I saw him reel too — saw his eyes go wide as his hand flew to his temple.

“Shit—Karyna—KAR—”

His voice tore into static.

I tried to speak.

My tongue wouldn’t work.

Everything was... fraying.

Fracturing.

Like my thoughts were getting unplugged one by one.

We hit the ground behind a generator stack.

I could barely see.

But I could feel him trying to shake me back into focus.

His voice was breaking.

“They wiped us,” he breathed. “Shit. Shit. Stay with me—”

Another shout.

Footsteps.

A squad.

He grabbed me, pulled me to my feet.

We ran again.

But I was slower now. Clumsy.

Everything was blurring.

The names, the smells, the sharp things in my head.

Then I tripped.

He yanked me up.

And that’s when the floodlights caught us.

Another shot.

Another hiss.

This one didn’t hit me.

It hit him.

Right in the spine.

He went down hard.

I stopped—turned—

“VIKTOR—”

“RUN!”

I didn't want to.

I swear I didn't want to.

But he screamed again, louder than I'd ever heard:

"KARYNA, RUN!!!!!"

So I did.

I made it through the gate.

Through the woods.

My name echoing like a glitch in my chest.

By the time I made it to the edge of town, I didn't know who I was anymore.

Didn't know what I was running from.

Just... that I had to keep moving.

And that's how I found it.

A broken building.

Past a rusty fence.

An abandoned preschool with a painted sign that just said:

"KIND HEARTS. SMALL MINDS."

I walked inside.

And there, in the middle of the main room, standing on a broken tricycle with a monkey mask on backwards—

was Ricardo.

He looked up.

Eyes bloodshot.

High as hell.

He squinted at me.

"...You a cop?"

I passed out.

RE:INITIALIZE

It started with a headache.

Not the bad kind—the usual shard hangover, light sensitivity, or fight-response jitters.

No.

This one felt like a zip file unzipping behind my eyes.

Sharp. Electric. Click.

I dropped the spoon I was using to stir coffee.

Xero was next to me in the kitchen.

“Did you feel that?” I asked.

He didn’t answer right away.

Then he said, very quietly:

“The fish had a gun.”

I turned.

Slow.

Stared.

“...what did you say?”

He blinked. Shook his head. Looked back at me.

“Kar... is something wrong?”

“No,” I said, almost breathless.

“I think something’s right.”

Two minutes later we were in the war room.

Cash scanned me with his jerry-rigged neural tracer.

He was eating cereal while it ran.

“Yeah, okay, this ain’t normal,” he muttered, mouth full of OffBrand Loops. “Your shard is flaring hard. Like pre-Delphi level.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means,” he said, waving his spoon at the screen, “that someone tried to wipe your drives, but your wetware just jailbroke itself.”

The monitor glitched.

Images started pouring across the glass—half-corrupted memories stitched back together.

The fish narc.

The broken swing.

Blood on linoleum.

Wires in our arms.

Tears in the white room.

His voice saying “Run.”

I staggered back.

Grabbed the edge of the table.

“No. No. I remember that. I—”

Xero turned to me, eyes wide, locked onto mine like they were magnets being reset.

“You were there.”

“You were the one they took.”

“You ran,” he whispered. “You got away.”

“You saved me,” I said.

My hands flew to my face.

I could feel it all now.

The pain, the warmth, the river.

Myadelka.

Postavy.

Every touch. Every look. Every impossible moment we survived together.

And then I laughed.

Through tears.

Because I could finally see him again—

Not as Xero.

Not just the guy I loved now.

But the boy who held my hand when I couldn't breathe.

The one who called me Kar like it meant something sacred.

“You were my best friend,” I whispered.

He stepped closer.

His voice caught.

“You're my wife.”

I reached for him.

He caught me halfway.

Our foreheads touched.

Our pulses syncing like a memory being rebooted in stereo.

“And I'm the mother of your son,” I said.

“And I'm never letting go again,” he replied.

Cash sat there blinking at us.

“Well, shit.”

“Should I leave the room or... throw confetti?”

I didn't even hear him.

Because everything I'd ever lost was now standing right in front of me—

and pulling me in like we were still thirteen and running for our lives.

The wind smelled like burnt motor grease and someone grilling meat illegally down on 10th.

I liked it up here.

No sounds except the hum of the grid, a distant siren, and the shivering of neon reflections across glass and gutter water.

Karyna sat next to me.

Close, but not touching yet.

She was still processing.

So was I.

I looked at her.

Really looked.

And for the first time since the scan, she looked... whole.

Not just the girl I met again in Tulsa.

But the kid from Postavy.

The one who threatened to break knees for me.

The one I screamed at to run.

"I never stopped thinking about you," I said.

She blinked.

Looked away.

"I didn't know who you were for years, Xero."

"Yeah," I murmured. "Once I escaped, I never stopped looking for you."

We watched the city flicker like a faulty starfield.

Her knee brushed mine.

She didn't move it.

"You remember the river?" I asked.

"Myadelka," she whispered. "We tried to build a raft."

"We tried to surf it using cafeteria trays."

"You got a nosebleed."

"You called me an idiot."

"You were an idiot."

We both laughed.

The laughter cracked something open.

She turned to me. Eyes glassy, but defiant.

"They took everything from us."

"Not everything," I said.

She touched my hand.

Interlocked her fingers with mine.

"Not anymore."

The pink glow from our marriage implants was barely visible in the dark.

But I could feel it.

Like a heartbeat under my skin.

Like hers.

She leaned into me.

I wrapped an arm around her.

We sat like that for a long time.

Watching Tulsa.

Listening to the world breathe wrong.

But for once... we felt right.

“I love you,” she said softly.

“I love you too.”

Null

The map glitched once.

Then again.

Then locked onto the square.

A pulse of red.

Cash slapped the monitor.

“Found it.”

I didn’t have to ask.

I knew the layout.

I knew the halls, the walls, the smell of it.

The sound of boots and clipboards and my own pulse screaming in my ears.

“That’s it,” I said quietly.

“The one I ran from.”

Xero was next to me before I even looked.

His hand brushed mine.

“We burn it,” he said.

Cash leaned back in his chair, arms behind his head.

“Facility’s still technically under Verogon’s shell ownership. Same security protocols. But the team’s there. Four heads of Project Delphi. Off-the-record ghosts.”

“Names?” asked Michael, cracking his knuckles.

“Doctor Maher. Lucent. Simms. And one guy just called ‘Director Vex.’”

“Oh good,” I said. “They even sound punchable.”

Ricardo raised his hand.

“I would like to be on fire for this one.”

“You’re not being on fire,” Xero muttered.

“Not on purpose,” Cash added.

Screech had been quiet, sitting on the edge of the table, chewing on a stim tab like it owed her rent.

She looked up, eyes twitching slightly.

“I want to kill the one with the clipboard.”

“They all had clipboards,” I muttered.

“Then I want to kill all of them.”

Xero looked at me.

“We go now. Before they vanish.”

I nodded.

The feeling inside me wasn’t adrenaline.

It wasn’t even anger.

It was memory turned blade.

I could still feel the blood in my hair from when I escaped that place.

Could still hear the sirens.

The voice screaming for me to run.

Cash tapped the screen again.

“Facility’s got an under-level server bay. Access tunnels out the back. Surveillance is low due to the place being off-book.”

“Which means we only get one shot,” Xero said.

“One shot,” I repeated.
“Let’s make it a massacre.”

The tunnel was quiet.

Too quiet.

Like the kind of quiet where childhood trauma lived rent-free.

My boots clicked once, echoing off the walls like a countdown.

Behind me, Xero walked silent, rifle gripped low, breathing calm.

“You okay?” he whispered through comms.
“Let’s just say if a clipboard looks at me wrong, I’m shooting it.”

Cash’s voice crackled in our ears.

“Infrared shows two guards by the east elevator. Pattern loop every eleven seconds. Xero, you’ll love this — they’re both vaping.”
“So killable,” Xero murmured.

We stepped into the corridor.

Me in a half-split armor vest rigged with twin auto-pistols, pulse blades, a shock baton, and something Ricardo called “fun confetti” (it explodes on impact — he’s insane).

Xero was built like the tutorial for pain.

Sleek black coat, matte rifle across his back, two pistols on his hips, one knife in his boot, another across his chest, and that look — like he was born in a bad idea and raised in a kill box.

The elevator door slid open.

Guard #1 looked up.

Guard #2 reached for his vape.

Mistake.

I shot Guard #1 mid-breath.

Xero took Guard #2 in the collarbone and followed it with a leg sweep so hard the guy folded like a camp chair.

“Elevator’s ours,” I said.

“Why are you hot when you kill people?” Xero whispered.

“Focus,” I grinned. “But thank you.”

Back at The House, Cash muttered:

“These two need a channel blocker.”

“Or just a cold hose,” added Michael.

We dropped through Level B3.

Knew the layout.

Same sterile floors. Same flickering lights.

My stomach clenched like it remembered being small.

I pushed the doors open to Hallway Delta.

It all came back.

The memory wipe never stood a chance.

“This is where they tested dream-response stim,” I whispered.

“This where you punched a nurse?” Xero asked.

“No. That was over there.”

Suddenly—footsteps.

Six of them.

We didn’t duck.

We didn’t run.

We opened fire.

Xero dropped two before they could blink.

I side-rolled into a crouch, tossed a ricochet disk, took out the knees of the third.

Ricardo’s voice on comm:

“Clean kills. Very romantic. I’m proud.”

“How do they look so good doing this?” Cash muttered.

"It's the trauma," Michael replied.

We kept moving.

Room by room.

I took out a med tech.

Xero dismantled a guard drone with a backhand blade throw.

My heart didn't beat fast.

It beat right.

Like this place owed me.

And I was collecting interest.

"Vault door ahead," Cash called.

"Delphi's core archive and their personnel logs are in there. Once you download it—"

"No," I said.

"We're not just downloading."

"We're ending it."

He was older than I remembered.

Wiry. Fragile in that way some evil people look when they're no longer being protected by power.

White coat half-unbuttoned. ID badge dangling.

Dr. R. Maher.

Still wearing his own name like a medal.

He didn't recognize me.

He just saw a girl in armor, holding a gun.

And smiled.

"Security will—"

I shot him in the leg.

“Try again.”

He hit the ground hard, fingers scrambling toward a dropped clipboard.

I stepped on his wrist.

He froze.

His eyes flicked up to mine.

Recognition hit like acid.

“Karyna.”

In the background, I could hear Xero muttering code to himself as he keyed into the archive stack.

“Sector unlocked. Patching data siphon. Five minutes to dump complete.”

He didn’t even look up.

“You want the heart rate monitors? Room 3B.”

I knelt next to Maher.

His blood made a lazy spiral on the floor.

“You took everything from me,” I said, voice calm.

“My family. My country. My brain.”

“And now you’re going to give me one thing back.”

“What—what do you want?” he stammered.

“I want to see you understand what you did.”

I leaned in.

“And then I want to see your fear turn into regret.”

He whimpered.

Started to say something about protocols. Government contracts. Oversight.

I shoved a shock baton into his ribs and let it cook for two seconds too long.

“You’re not dying yet,” I said as he screamed.

“You’re remembering.”

Behind me, Xero's voice stayed level:

"I'm in the origin logs. Multiple signatures. Nikita's in here too. So is someone tagged KAZ-1. That's Stabby's sequence ID."

"They cataloged our son," I hissed.

Maher gasped, fingers twitching.

"We—we were just trying to build—"

"You built a coffin," I snapped.

"And now we're burying you in it."

Xero's voice again, cold and razor-sharp:

"Files cloned. Implant registry corrupted. Credit nodes drained. Shutdown initiated."

"We're done here."

I stood.

Maher rolled onto his side, coughing.

I raised my pistol.

Paused.

"Do it," he wheezed.

"No," I said softly.

"You're not worth the bullet."

Then I flipped the pulse grenade from my hip.

And dropped it into his lap.

Xero walked up beside me as we stepped into the hallway.

Behind us, the vault lit up with cold blue fire.

"You get what you needed?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"But not what I wanted."

The hallway lights flickered low.

Sirens still pulsing behind the walls, half-dead alarms echoing like ghost lungs.

Karyna was silent beside me — her face unreadable, steps slow, as we moved past a sealed maintenance door.

That's when we heard it.

Muffled.

Panicked.

Whispering.

I paused.

Turned toward the sound.

Karyna stopped, too. Eyes narrowing.

"They locked themselves in."

The whispers turned to voices.

"Is it over?"

"Are they gone?"

"Someone check—"

One voice louder.

Female. Broken.

"I know that voice— That's Subject-K7. That's Karyna."

The door wasn't locked from the outside.

I tapped the panel.

It hissed open.

And there they were.

Seven of them.

Doctors. Admins. Lab techs.

Pressed into a corner of a supply room like rats in lab coats.

One of them — a man I remembered from dream sequencing drills — tried to stand up straight.

“You have to understand,” he said quickly.

“We were following protocol. We were just doing our jobs—”

“That’s the thing about jobs,” Karyna said flatly.

“You can quit.”

Another doctor — the woman who ran the adolescent cognition tests, I think — stepped forward with trembling hands.

“You remember now, don’t you?”

Karyna stared at her.

Eyes flat.

“Every needle. Every scanner. Every time you left me locked in that white box until I stopped crying.”

They looked at me next.

Like I’d have some answer. Some mercy.

“Why?” one whispered.

“Why come back?”

I tilted my head.

“Because you taught us.”

“Taught you what?”

“How to be ruthless.”

Karyna stepped forward once, her boots loud on the tile.

They all flinched.

“We didn’t come here to debate morality,” she said.

“We came to delete you.”

“But—”

“You used our blood to build your legacy,” she snapped.

“Now you get to drown in its ruin.”

I watched their faces fold inward.

Hope collapsing like scaffolding.

No one begged for their lives.

They didn't have the courage.

They just... watched us walk away.

Silent.

Haunted.

Defeated.

As the door sealed behind us again, Karyna muttered under her breath:

"They hid. While Maher bled."

"Cowards always hide," I said.

"Doesn't mean they live."

We stepped into the open.

The dawn hit us like static — pink bleeding into gray.

The facility behind us crackled with warning tones.

Fire alarms. Electric failure pulses.

And deep below that: flames.

The kind that eat from the inside.

Cash's voice came through on comm, unusually still.

"Copy that. Final protocol engaging."

Inside the war room, he hit a single key.

[LOCKDOWN: ACTIVE]

Back inside the facility — down past the lobby, through the ruined lab corridors, behind the sealed emergency door where seven Delphi staff still huddled — the doors hissed.

Then clicked.

The red indicator blinked.

Locked.

One of them ran to the panel.

“No, no, no—”

She slammed the override switch.

It blinked again.

Nothing.

“They sealed us in.”

“They can’t—”

“They did.”

The smoke crept through the vents like a memory uninvited.

Outside, Karyna looked up at the building.

No smile.

Just something settled.

“Cash?” she asked.

“Done,” he said.

“No alarms reached the city grid. No failsafes tripped.”

“Nobody’s coming.”

A long silence.

Then Michael’s voice on the channel, quiet:

“We really did it.”

Ricardo:

“Like... really-really.”

Screech:

“I saved confetti for this.”

Xero slipped his hand into mine.

No words.

Just warmth in the cool morning.

We turned.

Walked away.

And behind us, Delphi burned.

SAFE HOUSE

The engine clicked softly, still warm.

Tulsa's skyline buzzed behind us in a mix of static and sunrise.

But we didn't move.

The House loomed ahead — our mess of wires and noise and family.

But in the van, it was just us.

Just silence.

And breath.

And the smell of sweat, gunpowder, and the faint hint of cherry lollipop from the wrapper in the cupholder.

Xero hadn't said a word since we left the blast radius.

Not one.

He just drove with that storm behind his eyes.

Now, he sat still — fingers on the wheel, like the motion hadn't stopped yet.

“Hey,” I said gently.

He didn’t look at me.

“Xe’,” I said again.

Then he breathed.

Hard.

Like something shattered on the inhale.

“I love you,” he said suddenly.

Not cool.

Not suave.

Just... bare.

His voice cracked like glass.

“They did things to you I’ll never be able to undo. To Nikita. To me. To our son, I fought like hell to survive, trying to find you.”

His hands curled into fists on the wheel.

“And now that it’s over, I thought I’d feel—something. Like peace. Or relief. But all I feel is... tired.”

He looked at me, finally.

Eyes red. Face tight.

“They cataloged our love, Karyna.”

“They made it into some fuckin’ data.”

“And I keep thinking... if they hadn’t wiped you... if they hadn’t ruined everything—what kind of life could we have had? Like I don’t know, not crime, death, we’re just— I don’t know how to explain it, but us.”

My chest cracked open.

Hot tears blurred my vision before I could even stop them.

I slid across the console.

Pulled him into me.

His body shuddered against mine.

He buried his face in my neck like he was trying to disappear.

“You’re here,” I whispered.

“You’re still here.”

“You didn’t lose anything that mattered.”

“Because I’m still yours.”

“Forever.”

He clutched me tighter.

And together we cried.

No noise.

No Goonz interrupting.

Just us.

Two broken kids from Postavy.

Finally safe enough to fall apart.

Xero’s tears dried against my shoulder.

He exhaled slow.

Like it hurt to breathe without breaking something.

Then, softer than I’d ever heard from him:

“I’m tired.”

He didn’t mean sleep.

He meant everything.

“I just wanna see Stabby.”

We stepped out of the van.

The house was lit up like always — flickering porch light half-shattered, Ricardo’s music thudding through the wall like dubstep having a seizure, Trent yelling about someone eating his sour cream again.

Normal.

Which made it precious.

Cash was at the door when we walked up, holding a tablet in one hand and a half-eaten toaster pastry in the other.

He looked up, scanned our faces, and just nodded.

Didn't ask questions.

Didn't crack jokes.

He knew.

"Everyone's in the commons," he said, stepping aside.

"Stabby just passed out with a whole teething ring in his mouth like he owns the place."

"He does," I said quietly.

"That's his empire."

Michael threw an arm around both of us when we came in, gentle for once.

Ricardo saluted us with a juice pouch.

Screech said "You smell like justice."

Trent tried to say something but Cash elbowed him before it could get weird.

I crossed the room and scooped up Stabby — warm, wiggly, half-asleep in his neon onesie, tiny baby fists curled around a rubber dino.

He opened one eye.

Made a confused grunt.

Then saw me and smiled.

Like nothing in the world was wrong.

Xero touched his back — featherlight — and kissed his head.

"Hey, champ," he whispered.

"Dad's home."

We said nothing else.

Just walked back to our room, the three of us.

The door clicked shut behind us.

And for the first time since the fire... it felt like home.

The lights were low.

The hum of the city filtered in through the window like a tired machine breathing through its teeth.

We undressed slow.

Not like seduction.

More like shedding the weight of war.

Karyna dropped her boots first — one thunk, two thunk — then peeled off her hoodie and flung it somewhere near the desk. I pulled my shirt off over my head, tossed it aside, and crawled into bed first.

She joined me a moment later, Stabby in her arms.

He was half-asleep again — thumb drifting near his mouth, his other hand latched around her necklace chain like he was staking claim.

We lay there.

All three of us.

Tangled up in sheets that still smelled faintly like dryer sheets and Cash's off-brand detergent.

My arm over her waist.

Her legs wound around mine.

Stabby resting on her chest like a tiny riot survivor with zero clue how many men we'd killed today.

"This is nice," Karyna murmured.

I nodded against her shoulder.

"It's everything."

We listened to the street buzz.

Somebody yelling in the distance.

Sirens blending with music.

But none of it touched us here.

Not in this room.

Not in this bed.

“You ever think,” I said, “we weren’t meant to live this long?”

Karyna snorted softly.

“All the time.”

“And yet...”

“Here we are.”

I looked at her.

She looked at me.

She leaned in and kissed me.

Slow.

Soft.

Not hungry, not desperate.

Just real.

Then, she whispered:

“I love you, Viktor.”

The name stopped time for a second.

Nobody called me that anymore.

Except her.

Just her.

“I love you too,” I whispered back.

I closed my eyes.

Stabby snored.

Karyna's fingers traced the edge of my jaw.

And for a little while...

there was no war.

No betrayal.

No memories screaming to be remembered.

Just us.

Our bed.

Our family.